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IN THIS ISSUE

Tarrano The Conqueror

TARRANO THE CONQUEROR

To Hugo Gernsback, scientist, author and publisher, whose constant efforts in behalf of scientific fiction have contributed so largely to its present popularity, this tale is gratefully dedicated.

FOREWORD

In "Tarrano the Conqueror" is presented a tale of the year 2430 A.D.—a time somewhat farther beyond our present-day era than we are beyond Columbus' discovery of America. My desire has been to create for you the impression that you have suddenly been plunged forward into that time—to give you the feeling Columbus might have had could he have read a novel of our present-day life.

To this end I have conceived myself a writer of that future time, addressing his contemporary public. You are to imagine yourself reading a present day translation of my original text—a translation so free that a thousand little colloquialisms will have crept into it that could not possibly have their counterparts in the year 2430.

Apart from the text, you will occasionally find brief explanatory footnotes. Conceive them as having been put there by the translator.

If you find parts of this tale unusual or bizarre, please remember that we are living now in a comparatively ignorant day. The tale is not intended to be fantastic or full of new and strange ideas. I have used nothing but those developments of our present-day civilization to which we are all looking forward as logical probabilities—woven them into a picture of what life in America very probably will be five hundred years from now. To that extent, the tale itself is intended to be only a love story of adventure and romance—written, not for you, but for that future audience.

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TARRANO THE CONQUEROR

CHAPTER I

The New Murders

I was standing fairly close to the President of the Anglo-Saxon Republic when the first of the new murders was committed. The President fell almost at my feet. I was quite certain then that the Venus man at my elbow was the murderer. I don't know why, call it intuition if you will. The Venus man did not make a move; he merely stood beside me in the press of the throng, seemingly as absorbed as all of us in what the President was saying.

It was late afternoon. The sun was setting behind the cliffs across the river. There were perhaps a hundred and fifty thousand people within sight of the President, listening raptly to his words. It was at Park Sixty, and I was standing on the Tenth Level.[1] The crowd packed all twelve of the levels; the park was black with people. The President stood on a balcony of the park tower. He was no more than a few hundred feet above me, well within direct earshot. Around him on all sides were the electric megaphones which carried his voice to all parts of the audience. Behind me, a thousand feet overhead, the main aerials were scattering it throughout the city, I suppose five million people were listening to the voice of the President at that moment. He had just said that we must remain friendly with Venus; that in our enlightened age controversies were inevitable, but that they should be settled with sober thought—around the council table. This talk of war was ridiculous. He was denouncing the public news-broadcasters; moulders of public opinion, who every day—every hour—must offer a new sensation to their millions of subscribers.

[Footnote 1: New York City, about where Yonkers now stands.]

He had reached this point when without warning his body pitched forward. The balcony rail caught it; and it hung there inert. The slanting rays of the sun fell full upon the ruffled white shirt; white, but turning pink, then red, with the crimson stain welling out from beneath.

For an instant the crowd was stunned into silence. Then a murmur arose, and swelled into shouts of horror. A surge of people swept me forward. I could not see

clearly what was happening on the balcony. The form of the murdered President was hanging there against the rail; a score of government officials were rushing toward it; but the body, toppling over the low support, came hurtling downward into the crowd, quite near me; but I could not reach it—the throng was too dense.

The shouts everywhere were deafening. I was shoved along the Tenth Level by the press of people coming up the stairway. Shouts, excited questions; the wail of children almost trampled under foot; the screams of women. And over it all, the electrically magnified voice of the traffic director-general in the peak of the main tower roaring his orders to the crowd.

It was a panic until the traffic-directors descended upon us. We were pushed up on the moving sidewalks. North or south, whichever direction came handiest, we were herded upon the sidewalks and whirled away. With a hundred other spectators near me I was shoved to a sidewalk moving south along the Tenth Level. It was going some four miles an hour. But they would not let me stay there. From behind, the crowd was shoving; and from one parallel strip of moving pavement to the other I was pushed along—until at last I reached the seats of the forty mile an hour inside section.

The scene at Park Sixty was far out of direct sight and hearing. The park there had already been cleared of spectators, I knew; and they were doubtless bearing the President's body away.

"Murdered!" said a man beside me. "Murdered! Look there!"

We were across the river, into Manhattan. The Tenth Level here runs about four hundred feet above the ground-street of the city. The man beside me was pointing to a steel tower we were passing. It was several hundreds yards away; on its side abreast of us was a forty-foot square news-mirror, brightly illumined. On all the stairways and balconies here a local crowd had gathered, watching the mirror. It was reporting the present scene at Park Sixty. As we sped past the tower I could see in the silver surface of the mirror the image of the now empty park from which we had been so summarily ejected. They were carrying off the President's body; a little group of officials bearing it away; red, broken, gruesome, with the dying rays of the sun still upon it. Carrying it slowly along to where an aero-car was waiting on the side landing stage.

We were past the mirror in a moment.

"Murdered," the man next to me repeated. "The President murdered."

He seemed stunned, as indeed everyone was. Then he eyed me—my cap, which had on it the insignia of my calling.

"You are one of them," he said bitterly. "The last word he said—the lurid news-gatherers."

But I shook my head. "We are necessary. It was unfortunate that he should have said that."

I had no opportunity to talk further. The man moved away toward the foot of a landing stage near us. A south-bound flyer had overtaken us and was landing. I boarded it also, and ten minutes later was in my office in South-Manhattan.

I was at this time employed by one of the most enterprising news-organizations in Greater New York. There was pandemonium in there that evening. My supper came up in the pneumatic tube from the public cookery nearby, but I had hardly time to taste it.

This, the evening of May 12, 2430, was for me—and for all the Earth—the most stirring evening of history. Events of inter-planetary importance tumbled over each other as they came to us through the air from the Official Information Stations. And we—myself and a thousand like me in our office—retold them for our twenty million subscribers throughout the Anglo-Saxon Nation.

The President of the Anglo-Saxon Republic was murdered at 5:10. It was the first of the new murders. I say new murders, for not in two hundred years had the life of so high an official been wilfully taken. But it was only the first. At 6:15 word came from Tokyohama,[2] that the ruler of Allied Mongolia was dead—murdered under similar circumstances. And ten minutes later from Mombozo, Africa, the blacks reported their leader killed while asleep in his official residence.

[Footnote 2: Tokyo-Yokohama, Japan.]

The Earth momentarily was without leadership!

I was struggling to get accounts of these successive disasters out over our audiophones. Above my desk, in a duplicating mirror from Headquarters, I could see that at the palace of Mombozo a throng of terrified blacks were gathered. It was night there—a blurred scene of flashing lights and frightened, milling people.

Greys—next to me—had a mirror tuned to Tokyohama. The sun there was shining upon almost a similar scene of panic. Black and yellow men—on opposite sides of the Earth. And between them our white races in turmoil. Outside my own window I could hear the shouts of the crowd that jammed the Twentieth Level.

Greys leaned toward me. "Seven o'clock, Jac. You've got the arrival of the Venus mail. Don't overlook it ... By the code, man, your hands are shaking! You're white as a ghost!"

The Venus mail; I had forgotten it completely.

"Greys, I wonder if it'll get in."

He stared at me strangely. "You're thinking that, too. I told the British National Announcer it was a Venus plot. He laughed at me. Those Great Londoners can't see their fingers before them. He said, 'That's your lurid sense of newscasting.'"

Venus plot! I remembered my impressions of the Venus man who was beside me when our President fell.

Greys was back at his work. I swept the south shore of Eastern Island[3] with

my finder, and picked up the image of the inter-planetary landing stage, at which the Venus mail was due to arrive. I could see the blaze of lights plainly; and with another, closer focus I caught the huge landing platform itself. It was empty.

[Footnote 3: Now Long Island.]

The station-master there answered my call. He had no word of the mail.

"Try the lookout at Table Mountain," he advised me. "They may be coming down that way.... Sure I'll let you know.... What a night! They say that in Mediterrania—"

But I cut off; it was no time to chat with him. Table Mountain, Capetown, had no word of the mail. Then I caught the Yukon Station. The mail flyer had come down on the North Polar side—was already crossing Hudson Bay.

At 8:26 it landed on Eastern Island. A deluge of Venus despatches overwhelmed me. But the mail news, before I could even begin to handle my section of it, was far overshadowed. Venus, now at 8:44 was calling us by helio. The message came in the inter-planetary code, was decoded at National Headquarters, and from there flashed to us.

The ruler of the Venus Central State was murdered! An almost incoherent message. The murder of the ruler, at a time co-incident with 6:30 in Greater New York. Then the words:

"City being attacked ... Tarrano, beware Tarrano ... You are in danger of ..."

In danger of what? The message broke off. The observers, behind their huge telescopes at the Potomac Headquarters, saw the helio-lights of the Venus Central State go dark suddenly. Our own station flashed its call, but there was no answer. Venus—evening star on that date—was sinking to the horizon. But our Observatory in Texas could see the planet clearly; and gave the same report.

Communication was broken. The authorities of the Venus Central State—friendly to us in spite of the recent immigration controversy—had tried to warn us.

Of what?

CHAPTER II

Warning

It must have been nearly nine o'clock when a personal message came for me. Not through the ordinary open airways, but in the National Length, and coded. It came to my desk by official messenger, decoded, printed and sealed.

Jac Hallen, Inter-Allied News. Come to me, North-east Island at once, if they can spare you. Important. Answer.

Dr. Brende.

Our Division Manager scanned the message curiously and told me I could go.

I got off my answer. I did not dare call Dr. Brende openly, since he had used the code, but sent it the same way. I would be up at once.

With a word of good-bye to Greys, I shoved aside my work, caught up a heavy jacket and cap and left the office. The levels outside our building were still jammed with an excited throng. I pushed my way through it, up to the entrance to the Staten Bridge. The waters of the harbor beneath me had a broad band of moonlight upon them, dim in the glare of the city lights. I glanced upward with satisfaction. A good night for air-traveling.

My small personal air-car was on the stage near the bridge entrance. The attendant was there, staring at me as I dashed up in such haste. He handed me my key from the rack.

"Going far, Jac? What a night! They'll be ordering them off if many more go up.... Going north?"

"No," I said shortly.

I was away, rising with my helicopters until the city was a yellow haze beneath me. I was going north—to Dr. Brende's little private island off the coast of Maine. The lower lanes were pretty well crowded. I tried one of the north-bound at 8,000 feet; but the going was awkward. Then I went to 16,000.

But Grille, the attendant back at the bridge, evidently had his finder on me, out of plain curiosity. He called me.

"They'll chase you out of there," came his voice. "Nothing doing up there tonight. That's reserved. Didn't you know it?"

I grinned at him. In the glow of my pitlight I hoped he could see my face and the grin.

"They'll never catch me," I said. "I'm traveling fast tonight."

"Chase you out," he persisted. "The patrol's keeping them low. General Orders, an hour ago. Didn't you know it?"

"No."

"Well, you ought to. You ought to know everything in your business. Besides, the lights are up."

They were indeed; I could see them in all the towers underneath me. I was flying north-east; and at the moment, with a following wind, I was doing something over three-fifty.

"But they'll shut off your power," Grille warned. "You'll come down soon enough then."

Which was also true enough. The evening local-express for Boston and beyond was overhauling me. And when the green beam of a traffic tower came up and picked me out, I decided I had better obey. Dutifully I descended until the beam, satisfied, swung away from me.

At 8,000 feet, I went on. There was too much traffic for decent speed and the directors in every pilot bag and tower I passed seemed watching me closely. At the latitude of Boston, I swung out to sea, off the main arteries of travel. The early night mail for Eurasia,[4] with Great London its first stop, went by me far overhead. I could make out its green and purple lights, and the spreading silver beam that preceded it.

[Footnote 4: Now Europe and Asia.]

Alone in my pit, with the dull whir of my propellers alone breaking the silence of the night, I pondered the startling events of the past few hours. Above me the stars and planets gleamed in the deep purple of an almost cloudless sky. Venus had long since dropped below the horizon. But Mars was up there—approaching the zenith. I wondered what the Martian helio might be saying. I could have asked Greys back at the office. But Greys, I knew, would be too busy to bother with me.

What could Dr. Brende want of me? I was glad he had sent for me—there was nowhere I would rather have gone this particular evening. And it would give me a chance to see Elza again.

I could tell by the light-numerals below, that I was now over Maine. I did not need to consult my charts; I had been up this way many times, for, the Brendes—the doctor, his daughter Elza, and her twin brother Georg—I counted my best friends.

I was over the sea, with the coast of Maine to my left. The traffic, since I left the line of Boston, had been far less. The patrols flashed by me at intervals, but they did not molest me.

I descended presently, and located the small two-mile island which Dr. Brende owned and upon which he lived.

It was 10:20 when I came down to find them waiting for me on the runway.

The doctor held out both his hands. "Good enough, Jac. I got your code—we've been waiting for you."

"It's crowded," I said. "Heavy up to Boston. And they wouldn't let me go high."

He nodded. And then Elza put her cool little hand in mine.

"We're glad to see you, Jac. Very glad."

They took me to the house. Dr. Brende was a small, dark man of sixty-odd, smooth-shaven, a thin face, with a mop of iron-grey hair above it, and keen dark eyes beneath bushy white brows. He was usually kindly and gentle of manner—at times a little abstracted; at other times he could be more forceful and direct than anyone with whom I had ever had contact.

At the house we were joined by the doctor's son, Georg. My best friend, I should say; certainly, for my part, I treasured his friendship very highly. He and Elza were twins—twenty-three years old at this time. I am two years older; and I

had been a room-mate with Georg at the Common University of the Potomac.

Our friendship had, if anything, grown closer since my promotion into the business world. Yet we were as unlike as two individuals could possibly be. I am dark-haired, slim, and of comparatively slight muscular strength. Restless—full of nervous energy—and, they tell me, somewhat short of temper. Georg was a blond, powerful young giant. A head taller than I—blue-eyed, from his mother, now dead—square-jawed, and a complexion pink and white. He was slow to anger. He seldom spoke impulsively; and usually with a slow, quiet drawl. Always he seemed looking at life and people with a half-humorous smile—looking at the human pageant with its foibles, follies and frailties—tolerantly. Yet there was nothing conceited about him. Quite the reverse. He was generally wholly deprecating in manner, as though he himself were of least importance. Until aroused. In our days of learning, I saw Georg once—just once—thoroughly angered.

"... Came up promptly, didn't you?" Georg was saying. He was leading me to the house doorway, but I stopped him.

"Let's go to the grove," I suggested. We turned down from the small viaduct, passed the house, and went into the heavy grove of trees nearby.

"He's hungry," Elza declared. "Jac, did you eat at the office tonight?"

"Yes," I said.

"Did you really?"

"Some," I admitted. In truth the run up here had brought me a thoroughly hearty appetite, which I just realized.

"I was pretty busy, you know," I added. "Such a night—but don't you bother."

But she had already scurried away toward the house. Dear little Elza! I wished then, for the hundredth time, that I was a man of wealth—or at least, not as poor as a tower timekeeper. True, I made fair money—but the urge to spend it recklessly dominated me. I decided in that moment, to reform for good; and lay by enough to justify asking a woman to be my wife.

We reclined on a mossy bank in the grove of trees, so thick a grove that it hid the house from our sight.

The doctor extinguished the glowing lights with which the tree-branches were dotted. We were in the semi-darkness of a beautiful, moonlit night.

"Don't go to sleep, Jac!"

I became aware that Georg and his father were smiling at me.

I sat up, snapping my wits into alertness. "No. Of course not. I guess I'm tired. You've no idea what the office was like tonight. Roaring."

"I can imagine," Georg said. "You were at Park Sixty when the President fell, weren't you?"

"Yes. But I wasn't supposed to be. I wasn't assigned to that. How did you guess?"

"Elza saw you. She had our finder on you—I couldn't push her away from it." His slow smile was quizzical.

"On me? In all that crowd. She must have searched about very carefully to..."

I stopped; I could feel my cheeks burning, and was glad of the dimness there under the trees.

"She did," said Georg.

"I sent for you, Jac," Dr. Brende interjected abstractedly, "because——"

But Georg checked him. "Not now, father. Someone—anyone—might pick you up. Your words—or read your lips—there's light enough here to register on a finder."

The doctor nodded. "He's afraid—you see, Jac, it's these Venus——"

"Father—please. It's a long chance—but why take any? We can insulate in the house."

The chance that someone who shouldn't be, was tuned to us as we sat there in that lonely grove! With the doctor's widespread reputation—his more than national prominence—it did not seem to me to be such a long chance either, on this, of all nights.

"As you say, no use in putting private things into the public air," I remarked; and I felt then as though a thousand hostile eyes and ears were watching and listening. "We can talk of what everybody knows," Georg commented. "The Martian Ruler of the Little People was assassinated an hour ago. You heard that coming up?"

"No," I said; but I had imagined as much. "Did they say—"

"They said nothing," Dr. Brende put in. "The flash of a dozen helioed words—no more."

"It went dark, like Venus?"

"No. Just discontinued. I judge they're excited up there—the Bureau disorganized perhaps—I don't know. That was the last we got at the house, just before you came down. There may be something in there now—you Inter-Allied people are pretty reliable."

The ruler of the Venus Central State, the leading monarch of Mars, and our three chief executives of Earth—murdered almost simultaneously! It was incredible—any one of the murders would have been incredible—yet it was true.

There had been times—in the Inter-Allied Office, particularly—when I had been insulated from aerial eavesdropping. But never had I felt the need of it more than now. A constraint fell over me; I seemed afraid to say anything. I think we all three felt very much like that; and it was a relief when Elza arrived with my dainty little meal.

"Any word from Mars, Elza?" her father asked.

She sat down beside me, helping me to the food.

"I did not look," she answered.

She did not look, because she was busy preparing my meal! Dear little Elza! And because of my accursed extravagance—my poverty—no word of love had ever passed between us!

I thought I had never seen Elza so beautiful as this moment. A slim little thing, perfectly formed and matured, and inches shorter than I. Thick brown hair braided, and hanging below her waist. A face—pretty as her mother's must have been—yet intellectual as her father's.

I had taken Elza to the great music festivals of the city, and counted her the best dressed girl in all the vast throng. Tonight she was dressed simply. A grey-blue, tubular sort of skirt, clinging close to the lines of her figure and split at the side for walking; a tight-fitting bodice, light in color (a man knows little of the technicalities of such things); throat bare, with a flaring rolled collar behind—a throat like a rose-petal with the moonlight on it; arms bare, save for the upper, triangular sleeves.

It must suffice; I can only say she was adorable. Almost in silence I ate my meal, with her beside me.

Georg went into the house once, to consult the news-tape. It was crowded with Earth events—excitement, confusion everywhere—inconsequential reports, they seemed, by comparison with what had gone before. But of helios from Mars, or Venus, there were none reported. Of Venus, the tape said nothing save that each of our westward stations was vainly calling in turn, as the planet dropped toward its horizon.

I finished my meal—too leisurely for Georg and the doctor; and then we all went into the house, to the insulated room where at last we could talk openly.

As we entered the main corridor, we heard the low voice of the Inter-Allied news-announcer, coming from the disc in a room nearby.

"And Venus——"

The words caught our attention. We hurried in, and stood by the Inter-Allied equipment. Georg picked up the pile of tape whereon the announcer's words were being printed. He ran back over it.

"Another helio from Venus!" he exclaimed. "Ten minutes ago."

And then I saw his lips go tight together. He made no move to hide the tape from Elza, but she was beside him and already reading it. Her fingers switched off the announcer's droning voice.

"Pacific Coastal Station," Elza read. In the sudden silence of the room her voice was low, clear, and steady, though her hands were trembling. "P.C.S. 10.42 Venus helio. 'Defeat! Beware Tarrano! Notify your Dr. Brende in Eurasia, danger.'"

We men stared at each other. But Elza went on reading.

"P.C.S. 10.44 Venus helio. 'Lost! No more! Smashing apparatus!' The Venus sending station went dark at 10.44.30. Hawaiian station will call later, but have little hope of re-establishing connection. Tokyohama 10.46 Official, via Potomac National Headquarters. Excitement here continues. Levels crowded——"

Elza dropped the tape. "That's all of importance. Venus Central Station warning you, father."

A buzz across the room called the doctor to his personal receiver. It was a message in code from Potomac National Headquarters. We watched the queer-looking characters printing on the tape. Very softly, in a voice hardly above a whisper, Georg decoded it.

"Dr. Brende, see P.C.S. 10.42, warning you, probably of Venus immigrants now here. Do you need guard? Or will you come to Washington at once for personal safety?"

"Father!" cried Elza.

Georg burst out. "Enough of this. We cannot—dare not talk in here. Father, come——"

We went out into the corridor again, across which was the small room insulated from all aerial vibrations. In the corridor a figure was standing—the one other member of the Brende household—the maid-servant, a girl about Elza's age. I knew her well, of course, but this evening I had forgotten her existence. She was standing in the corridor. Did I imagine it, or had she been gazing up at the mechanism ten feet above the floor—the mechanism controlling the insulated room?

"You wish me, Miss Elza? I thought I heard you call."

"No, Ahla, not 'til later."

With a gesture of respect, the girl withdrew, passing from our sight down the incline which led to the lower part of the house.

It was a very small incident, but in view of what was transpiring, it gave me a shock nevertheless.

For Elza's maid was a Venus girl!

CHAPTER III

Spy in the House

The insulated room was small, with a dome-shaped ceiling, no windows, and but one small, heavy door through which we entered, closing it carefully behind us.

"At last," Dr. Brende exclaimed. "Now we can talk freely."

But I was not satisfied. "That girl, Ahla—can you trust her?"

They all looked at me in surprise. When one is close to danger, sometimes one recognizes it least; with Ahla in this household for over a year now, they could not imagine her an enemy.

"I saw her looking up at the insulator," I added swiftly. "Out there in the corridor. Am I talking wild? Perhaps I am. But she seemed startled; and she was standing just under the insulator, wasn't she?"

"But—" began Elza.

"Wait," I exclaimed. "When I first saw the President fall, at Park Sixty, I felt that a Venus man had done it. These other murders—they're all the same. Done by Venus men of the Cold Country."

"Ahla's country," Elza murmured.

"Yes. Exactly. And the Venus Central State has been attacked and has fallen. An assassination on Mars, and three here on Earth—all simultaneously. It's one gigantic plot, I tell you—and the Cold Country of Venus is at the bottom of it."

Georg jumped to his feet. "I'll see if the room has been tampered with."

He was back presently. "The insulator is intact. I set the alarm bell. If she touches it—"

"Where is she?"

"In the cookery, where she should be. I told her we would eat in an hour. That ought to keep her busy."

Dr. Brende made an attempt at a smile. "I think we are all a little overwrought—though with reason, no doubt. Sit down, Jac. Elza, come here by me. Don't look so solemn, child."

He drew Elza to him, with his arm about her. I would have spoken, but his gesture checked me. "I have much to say, Jac. I think I understand these events, perhaps better than any of you. Let me go back two years—when I was in the Venus Central State."

I nodded my remembrance; and he went on:

"At that time the authorities there were greatly perturbed. They were menaced by rebellion in the Cold Country. They would not let the Cold Country people into the Central State, for it is already overcrowded. You did not know that, did you?"

"You mean the threatened rebellion?" I asked. "They were trying to keep it secret, but we heard rumors."

"Just so. And Jac, I will tell you why they kept it secret. The Central State was encouraging emigration to the Earth. The Venus Cold Country is a poor place to live in—and on a whole its inhabitants are miserable people. Villainous, too, I should say. The Central State did not want them within its borders; and so it kept secret its troubles with them—and encouraged emigration to the Earth.

"We—as you know—make no distinction between Venus people. We are friendly with the Central State, and the Cold Country is governed by it—or was until tonight. Thus, you see, we have been in the position of having to receive these renegade immigrants. Shut out from all the good land and decent climate of Venus, they began coming here.

"But we did not want them, and of late we have been holding them off, cutting the quota allowed very materially. Last week, as you also know, in Triple Conference, our three races decided to allow at each Inferior Conjunction of the Earth and Venus, so small a quota that the Central State protested vigorously.

"The controversy has been hot; but the Central State—trying to foist off its undesirables on us—knows it is in the wrong. And fundamentally, it is friendly to us—I think it has proven that in the last two hours."

Again I would have spoken, but he went on at once.

"I know you're familiar with most of this, Jac. But you news-gatherers sometimes reason in too lurid a fashion. Let me go on. Mars was drawn into the affair. To extricate ourselves, we offered to admit—under temporary guard—all Venus immigrants who would pass on at once—at the first astronomical opportunity—to Mars. This would have been very nice for us—but not for Mars."

"They are hot-headed, in Mars," Georg commented.

"Quite so," said the doctor. "But very direct and forceful, nevertheless. They met our suggestion with a law excluding Venus immigrants entirely. It was this, I think, that precipitated tonight's events—though of course they must have been brewing for a long time."

"This Tarrano—" I began.

"I heard of him when I was in Venus," said Dr. Brende. "He was at that time a lower official in the Cold Country. Evidently he has risen in his world.

"I come now to conjecture—but I think it must be fairly close to truth. Tarrano, leading the Cold Country, has risen to open rebellion. His attack upon the Central State must have come suddenly—"

"You mean, just this evening?" Elza asked.

"No, of course not. But hoping to quell the rebellion, the Central State has suppressed news of it. At such a time—with this controversy going on—such reports would only injure the Central State's inter-planetary position. That's obvious, isn't it? Then tonight, when things were desperate, the Central State gave out its call. Tarrano has conquered Venus, I'm sure. And at the last, before destroying its helio, the Central State tried to warn us."

"Of what?" I demanded. "And what about these murders?"

"Done by emissaries of Tarrano, no doubt. For revenge, because of the Martian and Earth legislation—or for—"

"I think we should not speculate too much," said Georg. "At least, not on that line. They warned you personally, father. We were so careful to keep everything secret—"

Dr. Brende mopped his forehead. He was trying to appear calm—I knew he did not want unduly to alarm Elza; but I could see that he was laboring under great emotion nevertheless.

"Things get out, Georg," he said. "We have been careful—yes. But two years ago, when I visited the Central State, I told them there what I hoped to accomplish. There were no grave inter-planetary problems then—I thought I had no need of great secrecy. And since then, though, we have been very careful—"

Careful! With a Venus girl from the Cold Country living in their household! Truly, humans are a strange mixture of sagacity and folly!

"The Central State has heard something concerning you," Georg said. "That could easily happen—prisoners captured from Tarrano's forces, for instance. With dispatches—or perhaps some intercepted aerial message."

What was this secret they were discussing? I was the only one in the room who did not know it. And why had Dr. Brende sent for me tonight?

I asked him both questions. His face went even more solemn than it had been before.

"I sent for you, Jac, because in a measure I anticipated what has now befallen. Danger specifically to us Brendes, I mean. We count you as our friend—"

How it warmed my heart to hear him say that; and to see the glance that Elza cast me!

"—Our friend. I am an old man—you are young. Yet you are wise, too. We need you tonight."

He raised his hand when I would have told him how glad I was to be with them.

"You know something of my work," he said, as a statement, rather than a question. "I should say, mine and Georg's and Elza's, for they have both helped me materially."

I knew that Dr. Brende had for years been one of the Earth's most eminent research physicians. It was he who discovered the light vibrations which had banished forever the dread germs of several of the major diseases. He did not practice; his work was research only.

He went on: "Jac, I have found what for years I have been striving to find—a vibration of light, though it is invisible—which so far as I can determine, kills every bacillus harmful to man. There is nothing new in the idea—I have been working at it all my life. Sunlight! Altered and modified in several particulars, yet sunlight nevertheless. How strange that for countless centuries, man never realized the blessed boon of sunlight—the greatest enemy of all disease!

"Each year, as you know, I have conquered some of what we call the major diseases. A few of them—cancer[5], for instance—persisted in eluding me. Its bacilli—you can easily recognize the tiny purplish, horned rods which cause what we popularly call cancer—just would not die. No form of light or other vibration I could devise, seemed to hurt them—unless I used a vibration harmful, even fatal, to the blood-contents itself: I killed the cancer—in the words of you news-gatherers—but I also killed the patient."

[Footnote 5: A medical word, translated here as cancer, though possibly not that.]

His eyes smiled at the jest, but his face remained intensely serious.

"Then, Jac, I solved that problem—just a few months ago. And upon the heels of it I solved another, of infinitely more importance." He paused slightly. "I have learned how to kill, or at least arrest, the bacillus of old age. It is a bacillus, you know. We grow old because every day we live beyond the age of thirty—the bacillus of old age is attacking us. I call them the Brende-bacilli—these tiny, frayed discs that make us grow old. I have seen them—and killed them!"

It dawned on me slowly, the import of what he was saying.

"You mean——"

"He means," said Georg, "that at present we cannot only banish disease—all disease—but we can keep your body from aging. Not permanently, doubtless—but with the span of life lengthened threefold at least. Only by violence now need you die prematurely."

This then was the secret the existence of which Tarrano had learned. He had....

But Dr. Brende was quietly voicing my thoughts.

"It seems obvious, Jac, that this Tarrano at least suspects that I have made some such discovery as this. That he would withhold it from mankind, for the benefit of his own race, seems also obvious. That he is about to make an attempt to get it from me, I am convinced."

I remembered the wording of the message of warning from the Central State. "Your Dr. Brende, in Eurasia." I mentioned it.

"Our main laboratory is there," Georg said. "In Northern Siberia—isolated from people so far as possible, and in a climate advantageous for the work."

Elza spoke for the first time in many minutes.

"We have guards there, Jac—eight of our assistants.... Father, I called Robins a while ago. He said everything was all right. But don't you think we should call him again?"

The doctor had drifted into deep thought. "What? Oh, yes, Elza. I was thinking we should go there. My notes—descriptions of how to build a larger apparatus—larger than the small model I have installed there—my notes are all there, and I

want them. And I don't think, at such a time, I should trust Robins to bring them."

"What shall I send to Headquarters?" Georg asked. "They wanted an answer, you remember."

"I'm going there to the Potomac—tell them that. Tell them we will come there for safety. But first I must get my notes, and the model."

As Georg went to the door, something in his attitude made us all start to our feet and follow him. No alarm from the insulator had come, yet for myself I had not forgotten that Venus girl outside.

Georg was at the door, tense as though to spring forward as soon as he opened it. I was close behind him.

"What——"

"Wait, Jac! Quiet! I just want to see—in case she is doing something."

He jerked open the door suddenly and bounded through, with me after him.

The corridor was empty. But there was a whirring coming from the instrument room.

We leaped across the padded corridor. In the instrument room, Ahla the maid sat at the table with a head-piece clasped to her ears. She was talking softly but swiftly into the transmitter. In the mirror beside her I caught a glimpse of the place to which she was talking. A sort of cave—flickering lights—a crowd of dark figures of Venus men, seemingly armed.

She must have heard us coming. A sweep of her white arm dashed the mirror to the floor, smashing it. Then she cast off the head-piece, and leaping to her feet, faced us, blazing and defiant.

CHAPTER IV

To the North Pole

"You stand back! You do not touch me!"

The Venus girl fairly hissed the words. Her eyes were dilated; her white hair hung in a tumbling, wavy mass over her shoulders. She stood tense—a frail, girlish figure in a short, grey-cloth mantle, with long grey stockings beneath.

We were startled. Georg stopped momentarily; then he jumped at her. It was a false move, for before we could reach her, with a piercing cry, she was tearing at the instruments on the table; her fingers, with burns unheeded, ripping the delicate wires, smashing the small mirrors, flinging everything to the floor.

A few seconds only, but it was enough. She was panting when Georg caught her by the wrists, and we others gathered around them.

"Ahla!" Elza cried in horror.

I can appreciate the shock to Elza, who had trusted, even loved this girl.

Dr. Brende stood in confused astonishment, staring at the wreck of the instrument table. From a naked wire a little black coil of smoke was coming up. I fumbled about and switched the current out of everything.

We were cut off from all communication with the world. It gave me a queer feeling—made the small island we were on seem so remote.

Georg was shaking the girl, demanding with whom she had been talking and why. But she fell into sullen silence, and nothing we could do would make her break it. It infuriated me, that stubbornness; it was all I could do to keep from harming her in my efforts to make her talk.

Georg, at last, pulled me away; he led the girl to a couch and sternly bade her sit there without moving. She seemed willing enough to do that; she still had not spoken, but her eyes were watching us closely.

Dr. Brende was examining the smashed instruments. "Ruined. We cannot use them. Those messages—we must send them. I must talk to Robins——"

We went into the corridor, out of earshot of the girl, but where we could watch her. That we were in immediate danger was obvious, and we all realized it. Ahla had told some of her people that we were here on the island; doubtless was planning to have them come here at once and seize us.

How far away from us were they? I had seen in the mirror the interior of a cave-like room. Where was it? Might it not be near at hand—over on the mainland? Might not these enemies arrive on the island at any moment?

Georg suggested that we send our messages from the aeros. We had my own car—and a larger car of the Brendes. More than ever now, Dr. Brende was worried over the safety of his Siberian laboratory; but from the aero we could talk to Robins.

We went to the landing stage. I wanted to tie up Ahla, but as Georg said, she could do nothing now that the instrument room was out of commission. We admonished her sternly to stay where she was, and left the house.

On the open landing stage my small aero was lying where I had left it; but a moment's glance showed us it was wrecked—its instruments and its driving mechanism demolished!

There was no doubt about it now; Ahla had planned to keep us on the island while her people came and seized us. Fortunately the Brende car was well housed and barred. We saw that the gates had been tampered with, but with the limited time Ahla had to work in, she had been unable to force them. We swung them wide, and to our infinite relief found the car unharmed.

At once Dr. Brende called Robins. But the laboratory did not answer!

"It may be your sending apparatus," I suggested. "Send your message down to Headquarters—with their high power they'll get Robins quickly enough."

He tried that—sending also his answer to the previous coded message Headquarters had sent him. It was now 11:45. We waited some eight minutes, during which time I rushed back to the house. Ahla was sitting obediently where I had left her.

"You stay there," I told her. "If you move, I'll break every bone in your rotten little body."

Back at the landing stage I found Dr. Brende in despair. Headquarters could not raise Robins. They had relayed the message to Wrangel and Spitzbergen Islands—but the stations there reported similarly. Dr. Brende's laboratory did not answer its call.

This decided us. We had no wish to remain where we were. The Brende car, far larger than the small one of mine, was fully equipped and provisioned. We rolled it out, and in a moment were flying in the air.

Dr. Brende's car was large, commodious, and smooth-riding. A pleasure to fly in such a car! Georg was at the controls. I sat close beside Elza in the semi-darkness, gazing down through the pit-rail window to where the island was dropping away beneath us. It was a perfect night; the moon had set; the stars and planets gleamed in an almost cloudless sky. Red Mars, I saw, very nearly over our heads.

It was now midnight, and for the moment we chanced to have the air to ourselves. We rose to the 10,000-foot level, then headed directly North. It carried us inland; soon the sea was out of sight behind. Lights dotted the landscape—a town or city here and there, and occasionally a tower.

Dr. Brende was poring over charts, illumined by a dim glow-light beside him. "Can we get power all the way, Georg?... Elza child, hadn't you better lie down? A long trip—you'll be tired out."

"Call Royal Mountain[6]," Georg suggested. "Ask them about serving us power; I'll stay 10,000 or below. Under one thousand, when we get further north. Ask them if they can guarantee us power all the way."

[Footnote 6: Now Montreal.]

The station at Royal Mountain would guarantee us nothing on this night; they advised us to keep low. Their own power-sending station was working as usual. But this night—who could tell what General Orders might come? Everyone's nerves were frayed; this Director demanded gruffly to know who we were.

"Tell him none of his business," I put in. My own nerves were frayed, too.

"Quiet!" warned Georg. "He'll hear you—and it is his business if he wants to make it so. Tell him we are the Inter-Allied News, father. That is true enough, and no use putting into the air that Dr. Brende is flying north."

Royal Mountain let us through. We passed well to the east of it about 12:45—too far away to sight its lights. The cross-traffic was somewhat heavier here. Be-

neath it, at 5,000 and 6,000 feet, a steady stream of cars was passing east and west.

We were riding easily—little wind, almost none—and were doing 390 miles an hour. You cannot bank or turn very well at such a speed; it is injurious to the human body. But our course was straight north. Dr. Brende showed it to me on his chart—north, following the 70th West Meridian. Compass corrections as we got further north—and astronomical readings, these would take us direct to the Pole. I could never fathom this air navigation; I flew by tower lights, and landmarks—but to Dr. Brende and Georg, the mathematics of it were simple.

At two o'clock we had crossed the route of the Chicago-Great London Mail flyer. But we did not see the vessel. The temperature was growing steadily colder. The pit was inclosed, and I switched on the heaters. Elza had fallen asleep on the side couch, with my promise to awaken her at the first sign of dawn.

At two-thirty, the Greater New York-East Indian Express overhauled us and passed overhead. It was flying almost north, bound for Bombay and Ceylon via Novaya Zemlya. It was in the 18,000-foot lane. The air up there was clear, but beneath us a fog obscured the land.

At intervals all this time Dr. Brende had been trying to raise Robins—but there was still no answer. We did not discuss what might be the trouble. Of what use could such talk be?

But it perturbed us, for imagination can picture almost anything. Georg even felt the strain of it, for he said almost gruffly:

"Stop it, father. I don't think you should call attention to us so much. Get the meteorological reports from the Pole—we need them. If they tell us this weather will hold at 10,000 and below, we'll make good time."

Soon after three o'clock we swept over Hudson Strait into Baffinland. We were down to 4,000 feet, but the fog still lay under us like a blanket. It clung low; we were well above it, in a cloudless night, with no wind save the rush of our forward flight.

Then came the pink flush of dawn. True to my promise I awakened Elza. But there was nothing for her to see; the stars growing pale, pink spreading into orange, and then the sun. But the fog under us still lay thick.

We were holding our speed very nearly at 380 an hour. By daylight—about five o'clock, after a light meal—we were over Baffin Bay. I had relieved Georg at the controls. The headlands of North Greenland lay before us. Then the fog lifted a little, broke away in places. The water became visible—drift and slush-ice of the Spring, with lines of open water here and there.

And then the fog closed down again, lifting momentarily at six o'clock when we passed over the north-western tip of Greenland. The tower there gave us its routine signal, which we answered in kind. There was little traffic along here; a few local cars in the lowest lanes.

Shortly after six, when we were above Grantland, another of the great trans-Arctic passenger liners went over us. The San Francisco Night line, for Mid-Eurasia and points South. It was crossing Greenland, from San Francisco, Vancouver, Edmonton, to the North Cape, the Russias, and African points south of Suez.

At seven o'clock, with the sun circling the lower sky, the fog under us suddenly dissipated completely. We were over the Polar ocean. Masses of drift ice and slush, but for the most part surprisingly clear. At eight o'clock, flying low—no more than a thousand feet—we sighted the steel tower with foundations sunk into the ocean's depths which marks the top of our little Earth.

We flashed by the tower in a moment, answering the director's signal perfunctorily. Southward now, on the 110th East Meridian, without deviating from the straight course we had held.

It was truly a beautiful sight, this Polar ocean. Masses of ice, glittering in the morning sunlight. A fog-bank to the left; but everywhere else patches of green water and floes that gleamed like millions of precious stones as they flung back the light to us. Or again, a mass of low, solid ice, flushed pink in the morning light. And behind us, just above the horizon, a segment of purple sky where a storm was gathering—a deep purple which was mirrored in the placid patches of open water, and darkened the ice-floes to a solemn, sombre hue.

Elza was entranced, though she had made many trans-Polar trips. But Georg, now again at the controls, kept his eyes on the instruments; and the doctor, trying vainly once more to talk with his laboratory, now so close ahead of us, sat in moody silence.

It was 9:38 when we sighted, well off to the right, the rocky headland of Cape Chelusin[7]—the most northerly point of Eurasia. A long, low cliff of grey rock, ridged white with snow in its clefts. We swung toward it, at greatly decreased speed, and at an altitude of only a few hundred feet.

[Footnote 7: Now Cape Chelyuskin, Laimur Peninsula, Siberia.]

This was all a bleak, desolate region—curiously so—and I think, one of the very few so desolate on Earth. As we advanced, the Siberian coast spread out before us. Mountains behind, and a strip of rocky lowland along the sea. There were patches of snow—the mountains were white with it; but on the lowlands, for the most part the Spring sun had already melted it. The Spring was well advanced; there were many open channels in the water over which we were skimming—drift-ice, and slush-ice which soon would be gone.

Cape Chelusin! It was here that Dr. Brende had placed his Arctic laboratory—as far from the haunts of man as he could find—a hundred miles from the nearest person, so he told me. And as I gazed about me I realized how isolated we were. Not a car in the whole circular panorama of sky; no sign of vessel on the water; no towns on the land.

It was just after ten in the morning when we dropped silently to the small landing stage a hundred yards or so from the shore. We disembarked in the sunlight of what would have been a pleasant December morning in Greater New York; and I gazed about me curiously. A level lowland of crags with the white of snow in their hollows; a collection of broad, low buildings nearby, with a narrow steel viaduct running down to them from the landing stage. And behind everything, the frowning headland of the Cape.

The buildings stood silent, without sign of life. There was no one in sight anywhere. No one out to greet us; I thought it a little strange but I said nothing.

We started down the viaduct. Under us, in patches of soil, I could see the vivid colors of the little Arctic flowers already rearing their heads to the Spring sunlight. I called Elza's attention to them. A vague apprehension was within me; my heart was pounding unreasonably. But this was Dr. Brende's affair, not mine; and I wanted to hide my perturbation from Elza.

The viaduct reached the ground; a path led on to the houses.

Suddenly Dr. Brende called out:

"Robins! Robins! Grantley! Where are you!"

The words seemed to echo back faintly to us; but the buildings remained silent.

"You'd better wait here with Elza," Georg said.

"I'll go on—see what——"

He checked his words, and started forward. But Dr. Brende was with him, and in doubt what to do I followed with Elza.

We entered the nearest building, into a low, dim room, with doors on the sides. In the silence I seemed to hear my heart pounding my ribs. Elza's face was pale and perturbed, but she smiled very courageously at me.

"Wait!" said Georg. "You wait here."

He turned into a side door leading to another room, and in an instant was back with a face from which the color had departed.

"They're not in there," he said unsteadily. "Elza—you go outside with father.... They must be around somewhere, Jac. Come, look."

There was a rustle behind us. Arms came around me, pinning me. I heard Elza scream, saw Georg fighting two dark forms which had leaped upon him.

I was flung to the ground, but I fought—three men, it seemed to be, who were upon me. Then Georg's voice:

"Jac! Stop—they'll kill you."

I yielded suddenly, and my assailants jerked me to my feet. A group of Venus men were surrounding us. Georg, his jacket torn to ribbons, was backed up against the wall with three or four Venus men holding him.

And on the floor nearby Dr. Brende lay prone, with a crimson stain spreading on his white ruffled shirt, and Elza sobbing over him.

CHAPTER V

Outlawed Flight

Dr. Brende was dead. We knew it in the moment that followed our sudden assault and capture. Elza knelt there sobbing. Then she stood up, her tears checked; and on her face a look of pathetic determination to repress her grief. Now that we had yielded, the Venus men, searching us for our weapons, cast us loose. We bent over Dr. Brende, Georg and I. Dead. No power in this universe could bring him back to us.

Georg pressed his lips tightly together. His face, red from the exertion of his fight, went pale. But he showed no other emotion. And, as he leaned toward me, he whispered:

"Got us, Jac! Say nothing. Don't put up any show of fight."

Elza now was standing against the wall, a hand before her eyes. I went to her.

"Elza, dear——"

Her hand pressed mine.

Our captors stood curiously watching us. There seemed to be at least ten of them—men as tall as myself, though not so tall as Georg. Swarthy, gray-skinned fellows—one or two of them squat, ape-like with their heavy shoulders and dangling arms. Men of the Venus Cold Country. They were talking together in their queer, soft language. One of them I took to be the leader. Argo was his name, I afterward learned. He was somewhat taller than the rest, and slim. A man perhaps thirty. Paler of skin than most of his companions—gray skin with a bronze cast. Dressed like the others in fur. But his heavy jacket was open, disclosing a ruffled white shirt, with a low black stock about his throat.

A shifty-eyed fellow, this Argo. Smooth-shaven, with a mouth slack-lipped, and small black eyes. But his features were finely chiseled; and with that bronze cast to his skin, I guessed that he was from the Venus Central State. He seemed much perturbed that Dr. Brende was dead. Occasionally he burst into English as he rebuked one of the others for the killing.

No more than a moment had passed. Georg joined Elza and me. We stood waiting. Georg whispered: "They killed Robins and his helpers. In there——" He gestured. "I saw them lying in there. If only I had—"

Argo was standing before us. "This is a very pleasant surprise—" He spoke the careful English of the educated foreigner. His tone was ironical. "Very pleasant—"

Abruptly he turned away again. But in that instant, his eyes had roved Elza in a

way that turned me cold.

They led us away, down a padded hallway into the instrument room. It was in full operation; our Inter-Allied news-tape was clicking; the low voice of the announcer droned through the silence. I started toward the tape, but Argo waved me away. He had volunteered us nothing, and again Georg advised silence.

Argo had given his orders. Through a window I saw men carrying apparatus from the house. A small metal frame of sun-mirrors, prisms and vacuum tubes. Georg whispered: "Father's model."

The man with it passed beyond my sight. Others came along, carrying the cylinders of books—Dr. Brende's notes—and a variety of other paraphernalia. Carrying it back from the shore toward the headlands of the Cape, where I realized now they had an aero secreted.

Argo was at a mirror; he had a head-piece on; he was talking into a disc—talking in a private code. I could see the surface of the small mirror. A room, with windows. Through one of the windows, by daylight, palms and huge banana leaves were visible. A room seemingly in the tropics of our own hemisphere.

Argo was triumphant—explaining, doubtless, that he had captured us. Mingled with his voice, the Inter-Allied announcer was saying:

"Greater-New York 10.32 Martian Helio, via Tokyohama: Little People Proclamation—"

A man standing near the tape switched off the droning voice. At the receiving table, every few seconds came the buzz of the laboratory's call. Wrangel Island again calling Robins; but no one paid any heed. Argo finished at the mirror. He glanced over the tape, smiling sardonically. Then, methodically, deliberately, he swept the instruments to the floor, jerked out the connections, turned out the current—wrecked it all with a few strokes. A moment later we were taken away.

Outside, from back by the low reaches of the Cape, we saw an aero rising. They had loaded it with Dr. Brende's effects, and in it half of the men were departing. It rose vertically until we could see it only as a speck in the blue of the morning sky—a speck vanishing to the north over the Pole.

With four or five of the men—all those remaining—Argo took us three to the Brende car. We did not pass Dr. Brende's body, lying there in the outer room. Elza and Georg gazed that way involuntarily; but they said nothing. The greatest grief is that which is hidden, and never once afterward did either of them show it by more than an affectionate word for that father whom they had loved so dearly.

Soon we were back in the Brende car in which we had landed no more than an hour before. It was a standard Byctin model—evidently Argo and his men knew how to operate it perfectly. We were herded into the pit, and in a moment more were in the air.

Argo seemed now rather anxious to make friends with us. He was in a high

good humor. His eyes flashed at me sharply when I questioned him once or twice; but he offered us no indignities. To Elza he spoke commandingly, but with that deference to which every woman of birth and breeding is entitled from a man.

We rose straight up and, at 18,000 feet, headed northward by a point or two west. We would pass the Pole on our right—too far to sight it with the naked eye, I realized; but I knew, too, that the Director there would see the distant image of us on his finder, even though we refused connection should he call us. And we had no right to be up here in the 18,000-foot lane. They'd order us down—shut off our power, if necessary.

We could not escape observation on this daylight flight. Heading this way, it would take us past the Pole and on southward, down the Western Hemisphere over the Americas. We could not refuse connection for long. We would be challenged, then brought down. Or, if Argo answered a call, some Director would examine our pit with his finder—would see Elza, Georg and me as prisoners. We could gesture surreptitiously to him....

My thoughts ran on. Argo's soft, ironic voice brought me out of them.

"We will answer the first call that comes," he said smilingly. "You understand? We are the Inter-Allied News on Official Dispatch." He was addressing me, his glance going to the insignia on my cap. "You are of the Inter-Allied?"

"Yes," I said.

"What's your name?"

I did not like his tone. "None of your—"

"Quiet, Jac," Georg warned.

"Jac Hallen," I amended.

"Yes. Division 8, Manhattan," he read from my cap. "Well, when the first Director calls—from the Pole perhaps—you will tell him we are Inter-Allied Officials. He will see us here—I do not believe, the way we are sitting, that he will think anything is wrong. He will see us of Venus. There are Venus men employed by the Inter-Allied. Is it not so?"

I had to admit that it was. He nodded. "You will fool the Directors, Jac Hallen. You understand? You will get the reports on weather today down the 67th Meridian West. And ask if we can have power to the Equator and below." His eyes flashed. "And if you attempt any trickery—you will die. You understand?"

I did, indeed. And I knew that his plans were well laid—that I would be helpless to give us over without paying for it with my life—with the lives of Elza and Georg as well.

From up here in the 18th lane, the Polar ocean lay a glittering white and purple expanse beneath us. Then, again, a fog rolled out down there like a blanket. We passed the Pole, a hundred miles or more to one side, and headed Southward. No

challenge. Under us, occasional local cars swept by; but up here we were clear of traffic.

Elza prepared our lunch, in the little electric galley forward of the observation pit. The Great London-East Indies Mail Flyer crossed us, coming along this same level. It was headed toward the Pole from the British Isles. Its pilot challenged us before it had come up over the horizon. A crusty fellow. His face in the mirror glared at me as I accepted connection. He ordered me down, Inter-Allied or no.

Argo was at my elbow. His pencil-ray dug into my ribs. Had I made a false move it would have drilled me clean with its tiny burning light. I told the pilot we would descend. It placated him; but he saw Argo's face, mumbled something about damned foreigners—general orders probably coming tomorrow to clean out Venia—damned well rid of the traitors. Then he disconnected. Venia, Georg and I were sure, was where Argo was now taking us. But the rest of his comments I did not clearly understand until later.

We descended, and the flyer came up over the horizon and passed us overhead. We were pointing southward now, had picked up the 67th West Meridian and were following it down. The Hays station[8] challenged us; but they were satisfied with my explanation. Argo had us up in speed around four hundred miles per hour. We went down Davis Strait, over Newfoundland, avoiding the congested cross-traffic of mid-afternoon in the lowest lanes, and out over the main Atlantic. Night closed down upon us. It was safer for Argo now. We flew without lights. Outlawed. Had they caught us at it, we would have been brought down, captured by the patrol and imprisoned. Yet Argo doubtless considered the chance of that less dangerous than a reliance upon my ability to trick the succeeding directors.

[Footnote 8: Hayes Peninsula, Northwest Greenland, near the present site of Etah.]

With darkness we ascended again to the upper mail lanes. Over the main Eastern Atlantic now, and out here this night, there was little local traffic. The mail and passenger liners went by at intervals—the spreading beams of their lurid headlights giving us warning enough so that we could dive down and avoid being caught in their light. I prayed that one of their lights might pick us up, but none did.

North of Bermuda, a division of the North Atlantic patrol circled over us. The ocean was calm. Argo dropped us to the surface. We floated there like a derelict—dark, silent, save for the lapping of the water against our aluminite pontoons. The patrol's searching beams swept within a hundred feet of us—missed us by a miracle. And as the patrol passed on, we rose again to our course.

Argo gave us one of the small cabins to ourselves that night. He was still deferential to Elza, but in his manner and in the glitter of those little black eyes, there was irony, and an open, though unexpressed, admiration for her beauty.

We slept little. Georg and I—one or the other of us—was awake all night. We talked occasionally—not much, for speculation was of no avail. We wondered what could be transpiring abroad through all these hours. Hours of unprecedented turmoil on Earth, and on our neighboring worlds. We wondered how the Central State of Venus might be faring with the revolution. Would they ask aid of the Earth? This Tarrano—merely a name to us as yet, but a name already full of dread. Where was he? Had he been responsible for all this? Dr. Brende's secret was in his hands now, we were sure. What would he do next?

About three o'clock in the morning—a fair, calm night—our power died abruptly. We were in the Caribbean Sea not far above the Northern coast of South America, at 15º North latitude, 67º West longitude. Our power died. Elza was fast asleep, but the sudden quiet brought Georg and me to alertness. We joined Argo in the pit. He was perturbed, and cursing. We dropped, gliding down, for there was no need of picking a landing with the emergency heliocopter batteries—glided down to the calm surface. For a moment we lay there, rocking—a dark blob on the water. I heard a sudden sharp swish. An under-surface freight vessel, plowing from Venezuelan ports to the West Indian Islands, came suddenly to the surface. Its headlight flashed on, but missed us. It sped past. I could see the sleek black outline of its wet back, and the lines of foam as it sheered the water. We lay rocking in its wake as it disappeared northward.

Then, without warning, our power came on again. An inadvertent break perhaps; or maybe some local or general orders. We did not know. Argo was picking from the air occasional news, but he said nothing of it to us; and he was sending out nothing, of course.

Dawn found us over the mountains. The Director at Caracas challenged us. Argo kept me by his side constantly now. Dutifully we answered every call. The local morning traffic was beginning to pick up; but we mingled with it, at 8,000 feet and more, to clear the mountains comfortably.

Elza again cooked and, with Argo joining us, we had breakfast. Argo's good nature continued, as we successfully approached the end of our flight. But still he volunteered nothing to us. We asked him no questions. Elza was grave-faced, solemn. But she did not bother Georg and me with woman's fears. Bravely she kept her own counsel, anxious only to be of help to us.

We passed over the Venezuelan Province, over the mountains and into Amazonia, headwaters of the great river—still on the 67th Meridian West. The jungles here were sparsely settled; there were, I knew, no more than a dozen standard cities of a million population, or over, in the whole region of Western Brazilana. As we advanced, I noticed an unusual number of the armed government flyers above us. Many were hovering, almost motionless, as though waiting for orders. But none of them molested us.

Near the 10th parallel South latitude, we passed under a fleet of the white official vessels, with a division of the Brazilana patrol joined with them. A hundred vessels hovering up there in an east and west line—a line a hundred miles long it must have been.

Hovering there, for what? We did not know; but Argo, leering up at them insolently, may have guessed. They challenged us, but let us through.

"You are the last one in," this sub-director of the patrol told us. I could see him in our mirror as his gaze examined our pit—a dapper, jaunty fellow with the uptilted mustache affected in Latina. "Last one in—you Inter-Allied are a nuisance."

He was more particular than those directors we had passed before. My badge and my verbal explanation were not enough. He made me show him the Inter-Allied seal which I always carried, and I gave him the pass-code of the current week.

"Last one in," he reiterated. "And you wouldn't get in now without those refugees with you. Venia's closed after noon of today. Didn't you know it?"

"No," I said.

"Well, it is. They shut off the power early this morning for all low vibrations—yours and under. Brought 'em all down for a general traffic inspection. Then changed their minds and threw it on again. But if you're coming out north again, you've got to get out by noon. And you go in at your own peril."

He assumed that Argo and his men were Venus refugees going with me into Venia! I only vaguely understood what might be afoot, but I did not dare question him. Argo's side glance at me was menacing. I agreed with this director obediently and broke connection.

We seemed now to have passed within the patrol line. There were no more official vessels to be seen. We clung low, and at 12º South, 60º 2O' West, at 10:16 that morning we descended in Venia, capital of the Central Latina Province, largest immigrant colony of the Western Hemisphere.[9]

[Footnote 9: Now Matto Grosso State, Brazil.]

We landed on a stage of one of the upper crescent terraces. A crowd of Venus people surrounded us. Even in the turmoil of our debarkation, I wondered where the official landing director might be. None of the governing officials were in sight. The place was in confusion. Crowds were on the spider bridges; the terraces and the sloping steps were jammed. Milling, excited people. The foreign police, pompous Venus men in gaudy uniforms, were herding the people about.

But none of our Earth officials! Where were they, who should have been in charge of all this confusion?

My heart sank. Something drastic, sinister, had occurred. We had no time to guess what it might be. Argo drove us forward, with scant courtesy now, down in

a vertical car, through a tunnel on foot to what they called here in Venia the Lower Plaza. We crossed it, and entered one of their queerly flat buildings at the ground level; entered through an archway, passed through several rooms and came at last into a room whirring with instruments.

Argo said triumphantly, yet humbly: "Tarrano, Master—we are here."

A man at a table of helio-sending instruments turned and faced us. We were in the presence of the dread Tarrano!

CHAPTER VI

Man of Destiny

Tarrano! He rose slowly to his feet, his gaze on us for an instant, then turning to Argo.

"So! You took them? Well done, Argo!"

His gesture dismissed his subordinate; Argo backed from the room. From a disc, an announcer was detailing dispatches. Tarrano frowned slightly. He advanced to us as we three stood together. I had heard Elza give a low, surprised cry as we entered. She stood with a hand upon my arm. I could feel her trembling, but her face now was impassive.

Georg whispered to me: "This Tarrano——"

But our captor's voice checked him. "Come this way, please." He signalled, and three men came forward. To them he issued short commands; they took their places at the instrument tables. Then he led us from the room through an arch, over a small trestle, into a tiny inner courtyard. A tropical garden, surrounded by blank circular walls of the building. A patch of blue sky showed above it. A garden secluded from prying eyes, with only a single spider bridge crossing overhead. Vivid flowers and foliage made it a bower. Brown bark paths laced it; a tiny fountain splashed in the center.

Tarrano sat on the rim of the fountain; he gestured to a white stone bench where we three sat in a row, Elza between us. It made me feel like a child.

"Your father is dead." He was addressing Elza; and then Georg. "That is unfortunate. He was a good man. I'm sorry."

His voice was soft and musical. He sat there on the fountain rim, an elbow on his crossed knees, chin resting in his hand, his eyes studying us. A small, slight figure of a man, no more than thirty-five. Simply dressed; white trousers of the tropics, with a strip of narrow black down the leg-fronts; a girdle of gold; ruffled white shirt, with sleeves that flared a trifle, and a neck-piece of black. From his belt dangled a few instruments and several personal weapons—beautifully wrought, small—almost miniatures—yet deadly-looking for all that.

He was bareheaded; black hair closely clipped. A face smooth-shaven. Thin,

with a nose hawk-like, and black eyes and heavy brows. His mouth was thin-lipped, though smiling now, disclosing even, white teeth. Yet a cruel mouth, with the firm jaw of determination and power under it. The familiar gray Venus skin, but with that bronze cast of the people of the Central State.

At first glance, not an unusual or particularly commanding figure. Yet the man's power of personality, the sheer dominant force of him, radiated like a tower code-beam. No one could be in his presence an instant without feeling it. A power that enwrapped you; made you feel like a child. Helpless. Anxious to placate a possible wrath that would be devastating; anxious—absurdly—for a smile. It was a radiation of genius, humbling every mediocre mortal it touched.

I felt it—felt all this from the moment I came into his presence. Felt like a child, sitting there on that bench. Vaguely frightened; sullen, with childish resentment at my superior. And over it all, my man's mentality made me angry at myself for such emotions; angry at the consciousness of my own inferiority, forced upon me now more strongly than ever anything or any one had made me feel it before.

Tarrano was smiling gently. "... killed your father. I would not have had it so. Yet—perhaps it was necessary. The Lady Elza——"

I could feel Elza trembling again. Georg burst out: "What do you want of us? Who are you?"

Tarrano's slim gray-brown hand came up.

"The Lady Elza remembers me——" He seemed waiting with his gentle smile for her to speak.

"They called you Taro then," she said. Her voice was the small, scared, diffident voice of a child.

"Yes. Taro. A mere sub-officer of the Central State. But destined for bigger things than that, as you see. They did not like what they called my ambitious ways—and so they sent me to the Cold Country. That was soon after I had met you and your father, Lady Elza. You hardly remarked me then—I was so insignificant a personage. But you—I remembered you——"

Still there was in his voice and on his face nothing but kindness and a queer whimsical look of reminiscence. He broke off at the buzz of a disc that hung from his belt by a golden chain. He jerked it loose from its snap, and to his ear clasped a small receiver. Like a mask his gentleness dropped from him. His voice rasped:

"Yes?..." The receiver murmured into his ear. He said: "Connect him—I'll listen to what he has to say."

A moment; then on the tiny mirror fastened to his wrist with a strap, I saw a face appear—a face known throughout our Earth—the face of the War-Director of Great London. Tarrano listened impassively. When the voice ceased, he said without an instant's hesitation: "No!"

A decision irrevocable; the power almost of a deity seemed behind its finality. "No! I—will—not—do—it!" Careful, slow enunciation as though to make sure an inferior mentality could not mistake his words. And with a click, Tarrano broke connection. The mirror went dark; he hung his little disc and ear-piece back on his belt. Again he was smiling at us gently, the incident forgotten already—dismissed from his mind until the need to consider it should again arise.

"I remember you, Lady Elza, very well." A vague wistfulness came into his voice. "I wish to speak with you alone—now—for a moment." He touched two of the metal buttons of his shirt-front together. A man appeared in the narrow tunnel-entrance to the garden. A small man, no more than four and a half feet tall; a trim, but powerfully made little figure, in the black and white linen uniform worn also by Tarrano. Yet more pretentiously dressed than his superior. A broad belt of dangling weapons; under it, a sash of red, encircling his waist and flowing down one side. Over his white ruffled shirt, a short sleeveless vest of black silk. A circular hat, with a vivid plume. A smooth-shaven face; black hair long to the base of the neck; a deep, red-brown complexion. A native of the Little People of Mars, here in the service of Tarrano. He stood stiff and respectful in the tunnel entrance.

Tarrano said crisply: "Wolfgar, take these two men to the fourth tower. Make them comfortable."

I met Georg's eyes. Leave Elza here alone with this man? Georg burst out: "My sister goes with me!"

"So?" Tarrano's heavy brows went up inquiringly. A quizzical smile plucked at his lips. "You need have no fear. The Lady Elza——" He swung to her. "Not—afraid, are you?"

"I—no," she stammered.

"She'll come with us," I declared; but the stoutness of my words could not hide my fear. Tarrano was still smiling; but as I took a protecting step toward Elza, his smile died.

"You—will go—with Wolfgar—both of you." That same slow finality. His face was impassive; but under his frowning bushy brows, his eyes transfixed me. It was as though with his paralyzing ray he had rooted me to the spot. And Georg beside me. Yet he had not moved from his careless attitude of ease on the fountain-rim; the little conical golden weapon dangled untouched at his belt.

Elza was frightened. "Jac! You must do what he says. I'm—not afraid."

Again Tarrano was smiling. "No—of course not." His gaze went to Georg. "You are her brother—your fear is very natural. So I give you my word—the honorable word of Tarrano—that she shall come to no harm."

Elza murmured: "Go, Georg." Afraid for us, and doubtless she had good reason to be. It struck me then as queer that Tarrano should waste these words with us; but I realized, as did Elza and Georg, that we were treading very dangerous

ground. Georg said, with a sudden dignity at which I marveled:

"Your word is quite enough." He gestured to me. With a last glance at Elza, standing there frightened, but for our sakes striving not to show it, we let this Wolfgar lead us away.

Elza later told us what occurred. With her father, she had been twice to the Venus Central State—the visit of two years ago Dr. Brende had mentioned to me, and a former one. It was upon this first trip Elza had met Tarrano. He was an under-officer then, in the Army of the Central State—his name then was Taro. She—herself no more than a slip of a girl at that time—remembered him as a queerly silent young man—insignificant in physique and manner. He had escorted her once to a Venus festival; in a strange, brooding, humble, yet dignified fashion, he had spoken of love. She had laughed, and soon forgot the incident. But Tarrano had not forgotten. The daughter of the great Dr. Brende had fired his youthful imagination. Who knows what dreams even then—born of the genius as yet merely latent—were within him? He had never crossed Elza's mind from that time, until today she saw and recognized him.

When they were alone, still without moving from his seat, he signed her to come to him, to sit on the carpet of grass at his feet. She was frightened, but she would not show it. He made no move to touch her; he gazed down to meet her upturned, fascinated stare, still with his gentle, whimsical smile.

"Queer that I should meet you again, Lady Elza. Yet, I must admit, it comes not by chance, for I contrived it. My prisoner! Dr. Brende's daughter, held captive by little Taro!"

It seemed to amuse him, this whimsical reminiscence of those days when he was struggling unknown. "I want to confess something to you, Lady Elza. You were so far above me then—daughter of the famous Dr. Brende. Yet, as you remember, I aspired to you. And now—I have not changed. I never change. I still—aspire to you."

He said it very softly, slowly. She flushed; but for that moment fear of him dropped from her.

"Oh," she said. "I—I thank you for such a compliment——"

"A compliment? Yes, I suppose it is that now. You wondered, didn't you, why I was so lenient with your brother and that Jac Hallen when they would have refused me obedience? That is not my way—to be lenient." He said it with a sudden snap of crispness, but his eyes were twinkling. "It was because of you, Lady Elza."

"Me?" she murmured.

"You—of course. Because I—want you to like me." His fingers involuntarily touched a stray lock of her hair as she sat there at his feet, but when she moved her head away he withdrew his hand. His slow voice went on:

"Back in those other days, Lady Elza, the little Taro had strange dreams. A

power within him—he could feel it—here——" His gaze was far away; his fist struck his breast. "He could feel it—the urge to fulfill his destiny—feel it within him, and no one else knew it was there.

"Then—you came. A shy, rather pretty little girl, he realizes now, is all you were. But then—you seemed a goddess. A new dream arose—a dream of you ... I frighten you, child?" His tone was contrite. "I do not mean to do that. I am too hasty. Queer, isn't it, that I can make men, nations, worlds, obey me—but I have to bide my time with a fragile little woman?"

His mood changed; he stirred. "I could bend you to my will—break you—like that!" His lean fingers snapped. Then his hand dropped, and again he relaxed. "But of what use?... Your respect? I have it now. Respect and fear come to me from everyone. It is something more than that I want from you."

She would have spoken, but his gesture stopped her. "Queer that I should want it? Yes, I think perhaps it is. The little Taro was very queer, perhaps very impressionable. He knew he had nations and worlds to conquer—a destiny to fulfill. Not alone because of you, little Elza. I would not make you think that. But for you to share. The great Tarrano, master of the universe, and his Lady Elza! Worlds for you to toy with, like gems on a thread adorning your white throat——"

He must have swayed her, the sheer power of him. Impulsively she touched his knee. "I am not worth——"

His face clouded with a frown. "I would not try to buy your love——"

"Oh," she said. "No, I did not mean——"

"I would not try to buy you. I want to share with you—these worlds—as your due. To make myself master of everything, so that you will look to me and say, 'He is the greatest of all men—I love him'.... Soon I will be the greatest of all men throughout the ages. And very gentle always, with you, Lady Elza——"

A buzz came from the disc at his belt. He answered the call—listened to a voice.

"So? Bring him here." He disconnected. "...very gentle with you, my Elza..."

His voice drifted away. He seemed waiting; and Elza, her head whirling with the confusion of it all, sat silent. A moment; then Argo appeared, driving a half-nude man before him. A native official of Venia, stripped of his uniform. Argo flung him down in the garden path, where he cowered, his face ashen, his eyes wild, lips mumbling with terror.

Tarrano barely moved. "So? You tell me he was asleep at the mirrors, Argo?"

"Master, I could not help it! Since first you made your move in Greater New York at Park Sixty, I have sat there. Two nights and a day——"

"And you fell asleep without asking for a relief?"

"Master, I——"

"Did you?"

"Yes. I did not realize I was sleeping——"

A gesture to Argo, and the man was flung closer to Tarrano's feet. Elza shrank away.

"Left a mirror unattended. So?... The wire, Argo." He took the length of wire, gleaming white-hot, as the leering, gloating Argo turned the current into it—Tarrano took it, lashed it upon the poor wretch's naked back and legs. Welts arose, and the stench of burning flesh. A measured score of the passionless strokes made him writhe and scream in agony.

It turned Elza sick and faint. Shuddering, she crouched there, hiding her face until the punishment was over and the half-unconscious culprit was carried away.

"Very gentle with you, my Elza...."

She looked up to find Tarrano smiling at her; looked up and stared, and wondered what might be her fate with such a man as this.

CHAPTER VII

Prisoners

From the garden where Tarrano was talking with Elza, the Mars man Wolfgar led us to the tower in which we were to be imprisoned. Quite evidently it had been placed in readiness for us. A tower of several rooms, comfortably equipped. As we crossed the lower bridge and reached the main doorway, Wolfgar unsealed a black fuse-box which stood there, and pulled the relief-switch. The current, barring passage through every door and window of the tower, was thrown off. We entered. My mind was alert. This man of the Little People could not again turn on that current without going outside. Once it was on, like an invisible wall it would prevent our escape. But now—could not Georg and I with our superior strength overpower this smaller man?

I caught Georg's glance as our captor led us into the lower room—an apartment cut into the half-segment of a circle. Georg, at my elbow, whispered: "No use! Where could we go? Could not get out of the city——"

The hearing of the Little People is sharp. Wolfgar turned his head and smiled. "You will be quite secure here—do not think of escape." His bronzed fingers toyed with a cone at his belt. "Do not think of it."

Soon he left us, with the parting words: "You may use the upper circle of balcony. The current rises only from its rail." He smiled and left us. A pleasant smile; I felt myself liking this jailer of ours.

We took a turn of the tower. There were three bedrooms; a cookery, with food and equipment wherein evidently it was intended that Elza could prepare our meals; and two bath-apartments, one of them fairly luxurious, with a pool almost

large enough for a little swimming; tubes of scent for the water and the usual temperature rods.

"Well," I remarked. "Obviously we are to be comfortable." I was trying to be cheerful, but my heart was heavy with foreboding nevertheless. "How long do you suppose they'll keep us here, Georg? And what——"

His impatient gesture stopped me. His mind was on Elza—alone down there in the garden with Tarrano—as was mine, though I had not wanted to speak of her.

There was an instrument room, up the circular incline in the peak of the tower! We heard the hum of it; and when we went up there, the first thing we saw was a mirror tuned in readiness for us to view the garden we had just left. This strange Tarrano, giving Georg the visible proof that he would keep his word and not harm Elza. We could see in this mirror the image of the scene down there—Elza and Tarrano talking. But could not hear the words—those were denied us. We saw the culprit brought in; the punishment with the white-hot wire-lash, and a few moments later Elza was with us.

During the hours which followed, we made no attempt to escape. Such an effort would have been absurd. The current controls were outside, beyond our reach. Visibly, we were free, with open, unbarred arches and casements. But to pass through one of them, the barring current struck you like a wall, with darting sparks when it was touched. As Wolfgar had said, we had access to the upper balcony; the waist-high rail there, with its needle-points of electrodes, sent up a visible stream of the Nth Electrons—a dull glow by daylight; at night a riot of colors and snapping sparks.

Through this barrage an inner vista of the city was visible; towers, arcades, landing-stages and spider bridges a hundred feet or so above us; the lower levels beneath, and through a canyon of walls we could just make out a corner of the ground-plaza, with its trees and beds of flowers.

A queerly flat little city—tropical with banana trees and vivid foliage in every corner plot of the viaducts. At night it was beautiful with its romantic spreading lights of soft rose and violet tubes, and there was a fair patch of open sky above us—a deep purple at night, star-strewn.

Under other circumstances our imprisonment would not have been irksome. But these hours, most critical of any in the history of the nations of Earth, Venus and Mars, unfolded their momentous events while we were forced there to helpless idleness. All sending apparatus of our instrument room was permanently disconnected. But the news came in to us from a hundred sources—rolled out for us in the announcer's droning words; printed for permanent record upon the tapes and visible images of it all constantly were flashing upon the mirrors.

We spent hours in that instrument room—one or the other of us was almost always there. Save that we were ourselves isolated from communication, we were

in touch with everything. A whim of this Tarrano; perhaps a strain of vanity that Elza should see and hear of these events.

So much had occurred already during those hours of our trip over the Polar ocean and back that we scarce could fathom it. But gradually we pieced it together. Underlying it all, Tarrano's dream of universal conquest was plain. In the Venus Cold Country he had started his wide-flung plans. Years of planning, with plans maturing slowly, secretly, and bursting now like a spreading ray-bomb upon the three worlds at once.

In Venus, the Cold Country had conquered its governing Central State. Tarrano's army there was in full control. The helio station in the Great City was now reinstated. The Tarrano officials had already set up their new government. With notification to the Earth and Mars that they demanded recognition, they were sending the usual routine helio dispatches and reports, quite as though nothing had occurred. The mails would proceed as before, they announced; the one due to leave this afternoon for the Earth was off on time.

It was all very clever propaganda for our Earth public consumption. Tarrano—who was visiting our Earth at present, they said—had been chosen Master of Venus. His government desired Earth's official recognition, and asked for our proclamation of friendliness in answer to their own. The present Ambassadors of the Venus Central State to the Earth—there were three of them, one each in Great London, Tokyohama and Mombozo—this new government requested that we send them back to the Great City as prisoners of the Tarrano forces. Other Ambassadors, representing the new government, would be sent to the Earth.

All this occurred during the first few hours of our imprisonment in the tower. And during the day previous, at 7 P.M. this night—70º West Meridian Time—the governments of our Earth met in Triple Conference in Great London. Three rulers pro tem—White, Yellow and Black—to replace the three who had been assassinated. The responsibility for the assassinations was placed by the Council upon Tarrano. But this—from his headquarters here in Venia—he blandly refused to accept, denying all knowledge of the murders. Venia was the principal Venus immigrant colony of Earth's Western Hemisphere. It had already been closed by our Earth Council; its inhabitants interned as possible alien enemies, pending diplomatic developments. This was the meaning of that line of official vessels lying there to the north on guard. No one could leave Venia, and for a day Venus refugees had been ordered into it from everywhere.

At 8:40 this evening came from Great London our ultimatum to Tarrano. A duplicate of it went to the Great City of Venus via the Hawaiian Station. The Earth would not recognize the Tarrano government of Venus. We would hold to our treaty of friendship with the Central State. We would remain neutral for a time. But Tarrano himself we declared an outlaw. His presence was required in Washington to stand

trial for the assassinations, and the delivery in Washington of Dr. Brende's notes and model was demanded.

The ultimatum carried a day of grace; the alternate was a declaration of war by the Earth, and our immediate attack upon Venia. It was the same proposition which our War Director had previously made unofficially to Tarrano while he was there in the garden with Elza and which Tarrano so summarily had rejected.

The ultimatum came to us in the tower as we sat listening to the announcer's measured tones. Elza exclaimed:

"But why do they wait? Father's model must be here. Tarrano, the leader of all this—is here. Within the hour those vessels of war could sweep in here—capture Tarrano—recover father's model——"

Georg interrupted quietly: "No one knows if the model is here. That other car from the laboratory—we don't know where it went. The plundered laboratory has been found, of course. No station up there is near enough to have eavesdropped upon our capture, but the whole thing must have come out by now. But that aero with the model may have met an inter-planetary vessel—the model may be on the way to Venus by now."

"Georg," I exclaimed, "do you know the workings of that model? Could you build another without the notes?"

He nodded solemnly. "Yes. And they know that, in Washington. I could build another. But they know by now, that I, too, am in Tarrano's hands——"

"And he will kill you, of course, to destroy that knowledge and keep the secret for himself——" I did not say it aloud, for Elza's sake; but I thought it, and I realized that Georg was thinking it also.

Dr. Brende's secret of longevity was the crux of all this turmoil—the lever by which Tarrano was raising himself. Scores of facts amid the tumultuous news of these hours showed us that. For months, throughout Venus, Tarrano had spread the insidious propaganda that he alone had the secret of immortality—that when he was made ruler, he would use it for the benefit of his followers.

Converts to Tarrano's cause were everywhere. In the Central State many welcomed the coming of his army. And now from the Great City his propaganda was being sent to the Earth. Murmurs from our own Earth public were beginning to be heard. The ignorant lower classes seemed ready to swallow anything. A new beneficent ruler who guaranteed everlasting life! Throughout the ages people have flocked to that same standard!

In Mars, much the same was transpiring. At almost her closest point to the Earth these days, Red Mars sent us constant helios from the midnight sky. The Little People had appointed a new ruler to take the place of him who had been assassinated. The Council there put the assassination to unknown causes. Tarrano was held blameless. The Little People declared themselves neutral. But they gave

prompt official recognition to the Tarrano government of Venus. And everywhere throughout Mars the public was stirred by the thought of everlasting life.

"Fools!" muttered Georg. "That Little People government—they'll have a revolution of their own to fight at this rate. Can't you see what Tarrano is doing? Working everywhere with propaganda—working on the public—the gullible public ready always to swallow anything——"

On Earth, lay the crisis. Our own governments only had taken a firm stand. What could Tarrano do with this ultimatum? Either he must yield himself and the Brende secret, or a war in which he would be immediately overwhelmed here in Venia would follow.

It was nearly ten o'clock that first night. Elza had gone to the balcony. We heard her call us softly, but with obvious tenseness. Out there we found her pointing excitedly. A few hundred feet away and somewhat below us was a tower similar to our own. In one of its oblong casements a glow of rose-light showed. And within the glow was the full-length figure of a girl. We could see her plainly, though a small image at that distance with the naked eye, and our personal vision instruments had been taken from us. A slender, imperial figure—a young girl seemingly about Elza's age. Dressed in a shimmering blue kirtle, short after the Venus fashion, with long grey stockings beneath. A girl with flowing waves of pure white hair to her waist—a girl of the Venus Central State. She seemed, like ourselves, a prisoner. An aura or barrage was around her tower. She stood there, back in the tower room, full in the rose-light as though surreptitiously trying to attract our attention.

As we gathered on our balcony, behind the glow of our own barrage, she gestured to us vehemently. And then, with one white arm, she began to semaphore. One arm, and then with both. Georg and I recognized it—the Secondary Code of the Anglo-Saxon Army. We murmured the letters aloud as she gave them:

"I am——" Abruptly she stopped. A violent gesture, and she disappeared; her rose-glow went out; her tower casement was dark. On a lower spider bridge Tarrano had appeared. He was crossing it on foot toward our tower, his small erect form advancing hastelessly, with the figure of Argo behind him.

He reached our lower entrance, cut off the barrage there, and entered. Argo replaced the barrage, lingered an instant, gazing upward at us with his habitual leer. Then he retraced his steps across the bridge and disappeared.

A moment more, and in our lounging apartment Tarrano faced us.

CHAPTER VIII

Unknown Friend

"Sit down." Tarrano motioned us to feather hassocks and stretched himself indolently upon our pillowed divan. With an elbow and hand supporting his head

he regarded us with his sombre black eyes, his face impassive, an inscrutable smile playing about his thin lips.

"I wish to speak with you three. The Lady Elza——" His glance went to her briefly, then to Georg. "She has told you, perhaps, what I had to say to her?"

"Yes," said Georg shortly.

Elza had indeed told us. And with sinking heart I had listened, for it did not seem to me that any maiden could resist so dominant a man as this. But I had made no comment, nor had Georg. Elza had seemed unwilling to discuss it, had flushed when her brother's eyes had keenly searched her face.

And she flushed now, but Tarrano dismissed the subject with a gesture. "That—is between her and me.... You have been following the general news, I assume? I provided you with it." He rolled a little cylinder of the arrant-leaf, and lighted it.

"Yes," said Georg.

Georg was waiting for our captor to lay his cards before us. Tarrano knew it; his smile broadened. "I shall not mince words, Georg Brende. Between men, that is not necessary. And we are isolated here—no one beyond Venia can listen. As you know, I am already Master of Venus. In Mars—that will shortly come. They will hand themselves over to me—or I shall conquer them." He shrugged. "It is quite immaterial." He added contemptuously: "People are fools—almost everyone—it is no great feat to dominate them."

"You'll find our Earth leaders are not fools," Georg said quietly.

Tarrano's heavy brows went up. "So?" He chuckled. "That remains to be seen. Well, you heard the ultimatum they sent me? What do you think of it?"

"I think you'd best obey it," I burst out impulsively.

"I was not speaking to you." He did not change the level intonation of his voice, nor even look my way. "You are to die tomorrow, Jac Hallen——"

Elza gave a low cry; instantly his gaze swung to her. "So? That strikes at you, Lady Elza?"

She flushed even deeper than before, and the flush, with her instinctive look to me that accompanied it, made my heart leap. Tarrano's face had darkened. "You would not have me put him to death, Lady Elza?"

She was struggling to guard from him her emotions; struggling to match her woman's wit against him.

"I—why no," she stammered.

"No? Because he is—your friend?"

"Yes. I—I would not let you do that."

"Not let me?" Incredulous amusement swept over his face.

"No. I would not—let you do that." Her gaze now held level with his. A strength came to her voice. Georg and I watched her—and watched Tarrano—fascinated.

She repeated once more: "No. I would not let you."

"How could you stop me?"

"I would—tell you not to do it."

"So?" Admiration leaped into his eyes to mingle with the amusement there. "You would tell me not to do it?"

"Yes." She did not flinch before him.

"And you think then—I would spare him?"

"Yes. I know you would."

"And why?"

"Because—if you did a thing like that—I should—hate you."

"Hate——"

"Yes. Hate you—always."

He turned suddenly away from her, sitting up with a snap of alertness. "Enough of this." Did he realize he was defeated in this passage with a girl? Was he trying to cover from us the knowledge of his defeat? And then again the bigness of him made itself manifest. He acknowledged soberly:

"You have bested me, Lady Elza. And you've made me realize that I—Tarrano—have almost lowered myself to admit this Jac Hallen my rival." He laughed harshly. "Not so! A rival? Pah! He shall live if you wish it—live close by you and me—as an insect might live on a twig by the rim of the eagle's nest.... Enough!... I was asking you, Georg Brende, of this ultimatum. Should I yield to it?" He had suppressed his other emotions; he was amusing himself with us again.

"Yes," said Georg.

"But I have already refused—today in the garden. Would you have me change? I am not one lightly to change a decision already reached."

"You'll have to."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. Of one thing I am sure. I cannot let them declare war against me just now. I have no defense, here in Venia. Scarce the armament for my handful of men. Your vessels of war would sweep down here and overpower me in a breath—trap me here helpless——"

"Of course," said Georg.

"And so I must not let them do that. They want me to come to Washington with the Brende model—deliver it over to them. Yet—that does not appeal to me. Tomorrow I shall have to bargain with them further. I could not deliver to them the Brende model." He was chuckling at his own phrasing. "No—no, I could not do that."

"Why?" demanded Georg. "Isn't the model here?"

"It is—where it is," said Tarrano. He became more serious. "You, Georg—you

could build one of those models?"

Georg did not answer.

"You could, of course," Tarrano insisted. "My spy, Ahla—you remember her, the Lady Elza's maid for so long? She is here in Venia; she tells me of your knowledge and skill with your father's apparatus. So you see, I realize I have two to guard—the model itself, and you, who know its secret."

He now became more openly alert and earnest than I had ever seen him. The light from the tube along the side wall edged his lean, serious face with its silver glow. "I've a proposition for you, Georg Brende. Between men, such things can be put bruskly. Your sister—her personal decision will take time. I would not force it. But meanwhile—I do not like to hold you and her as captives."

The shadow of a smile crossed Georg's face. "We shall be glad to have you set us free."

Tarrano remained grave. "You are a humorist. And a clever young fellow, Georg Brende. You—as Elza's brother—and as your father's son with your medical knowledge—you can be of great use to me. Suppose I offer you a place by my side always? To share with me—and with the Lady Elza—these conquests.... Wait! It is not the part of wisdom to decide until you have all the facts. I shall confide in you one of my plans. The publics of Venus, Mars and the Earth—they think this everlasting life, as they call it, is to be shared with them."

His chuckle was the rasp of a file on a block of adamant. "Shared with them! That is the bait I dangle before their noses. In reality, I shall share it only with the Lady Elza. And with you—her brother, and the mate you some day will take for yourself. Indeed, I have a maiden already at hand, picked out for you.... But that can come later.... Everlasting life? Nonsense! Your father's discovery cannot confer that. But we shall live two centuries or more. Four of us. To see the generations come and go—frail mortals, while we live on to conquer and to rule the worlds.... Come, what do you say?"

"I say no."

Tarrano showed no emotion, save perhaps a flicker of admiration. "You are decisive. You have many good qualities, Georg Brende. I wonder if you have any good reasons?"

"Because you are an enemy of my world," Georg declared, with more heat than he had yet displayed.

"Ah! Patriotism! A good lure for the ignorant masses, that thing they call patriotism. For rulers, a good mask with which to hide their unscrupulous schemes. That's all it is, Georg Brende. Cannot you give me a better reason? You think perhaps I am not sincere? You think I would not share longevity with you—that I would play you false?"

"No," Georg declared. "But my father's work was for the people. I'm not talk-

ing patriotism—only humanitarianism. The strife, suffering in our worlds—you would avoid it yourself—and gloat while others bore it. You——"

"Youth!" Tarrano interrupted. "Altruism! It is very pretty in theory—but quite nonsensical. Man lifts himself—the individual must look out for himself—not for others. Each man to his destiny—and the weak go down and the strong go up. It is the way of all life—animal and human. It always has been—and it always will be. The way of the universe. You are very young, Georg Brende."

"Perhaps," Georg said, and fell silent.

Tarrano abruptly rose to his feet. "Calm thought is better than argument. You have imagination—you can picture what I offer. Think it over. And if youth is your trouble——" His eyes were twinkling. "I shall have to wait until you grow up. We have a long road to travel—empires cannot be built in a day."

He paused before Elza with a grave, dignified bow. "Goodnight, Lady Elza."

"Goodnight," she said.

He left us. We stood listening to his footsteps as he quietly descended the tower incline. At his summons, the barrage was lifted. He went out. From the balcony we saw him cross the spider bridge, with Argo at his heels. As they vanished into the yawning mouth of an arcade beyond the bridge, again came that rose-glow in the other tower. We saw again the girl with flowing white hair standing there. And now she was waving us back.

"She wants us inside, where we can't be seen," Georg murmured. We drew back into the room, standing where we still could see the girl. I wondered then—and we had discussed it several times these last hours—if the interior of our tower were under observation by some distant guard. We felt that probably it was, visibly and audibly; and we had been very careful of what we said aloud.

But now, if we were watched, we could not help it; we would have to take the chance. The figure of the girl showed plainly down there through the other casement. And again, with slow-moving white arms she began to semaphore. A queer application of the Secondary Code, which always is used officially with coral-light beams over considerable distances. But it sufficed in this emergency. Slowly she spelled out the letters, words, phrases.

"I am Princess Maida——"

Georg whispered to us: "Hereditary ruler of the Central State——"

I nodded. "Watch, Georg——"

"Prisoner——" came next: "Like yourselves, and we must escape."

She paused a moment, letting her arms drop to her sides, shaking the glorious waves of her white hair with a toss of her head. Then, at a gesture from Georg that he understood, she began again:

"Escape tonight——"

I half expected that any moment Tarrano or one of his men would burst in to stop this. But the signals continued.

"I am sending you a friend—tonight—soon—he will come to you. With plans for our escape. A good friend——"

Her tower abruptly went dark. Cautiously I gazed down from our balcony. Argo had appeared on the spider bridge; he was pacing back and forth. Did he suspect anything? We could not tell, but it seemed not. It was the midnight hour; a brilliant white flash swept the city to mark it.

In a low corner of the balcony, behind the glow of our barrage, we crouched together, whispering excitedly. But cautiously, for we knew that the microphonic ears of a jailor might be upon us. The Princess Maida—here in Tarrano's hands! She was sending us a friend—tonight—soon; a friend who would help us all to escape.

"By the code!" Georg exclaimed. "If we could get to Washington—if I could be there now in this crisis—with my knowledge of the Brende light——"

Far above our personal safety, our lives, lay the importance of Georg's knowledge. With the Brende secret—through him—in the hands of the Earth Council, Tarrano's greatest lever to power would be broken. Our Earth public would sway back to patriotic loyalty. The Little People of Mars unquestionably would remain friendly with us, with the Brende light to be developed on Earth and shared with them. They would see Tarrano perhaps, for what he was—a dangerous, unscrupulous enemy.... If only Georg could escape....

An hour went by with murmured thoughts like these. A friend coming to help us? How could he reach us? And how help us to escape?

We crouched there, waiting. Argo—obviously on night guard—still paced the bridge. The city was comparatively dark and silent; yet even so, there seemed more activity than we felt was normal. Occasional beams flashed across the narrow segment of our sky. The crescent terraces, visible through a shallow canyon of buildings to the left, were a blaze of colored lights with the dark figures of people thronging them. The mingled hum of instruments was in the night air; sometimes the snap of an aerial; and the steady, clicking whir of the night escalators on the city street levels and inclines.

It seemed hours that we waited. The green flash of the second hour past midnight bathed the city in its split-second lurid glare. Elza had fallen asleep, beside us on the feathered hassock of our balcony corner. But Georg and I were fully alert—waiting for this unknown friend. Georg had smoked innumerable arrant-leaf cylinders. Through the insulated tube, from a public cookery occasional hot dishes were passing our dining room for us to take if we wished. But we had touched none of them. From the food stock on hand, Elza had cooked our two simple meals. But now, with Elza asleep, Georg left me and returned in a moment with steaming

cups of taro. We drank it silently, still waiting. Argo still paced the bridge on guard. Presently we saw the figure of Wolfgar join him. The two spoke together a moment; then Argo disappeared; Wolfgar paced back and forth on guard in his place.

At 2:30 the Inter-Allied announcer—for half an hour past quite silent—brought us to our feet, his monotone droning from the disc in our instrument room:

''Greater New York, Inter-Allied Unofficial 2:27 A. M. Tarrano replies to the Earth Council Ultimatum....''

Our start woke up Elza. Together we rushed into the instrument room.

''With many hours yet before the Earth Council Ultimatum expires, it is unofficially reported that Tarrano has sent his note in answer. Its text, we are reliably informed, is now in the hands of our Governments at Great London, Greater New York, Tokyohama and Mombozo. Helios of it also have been sent to Tarrano's own government of Venus and to the Little People of Mars. We have as yet no further details....''

A buzz came as he ended, with only the click of the tape continuing as it printed his words. A period of silence, then again his voice:

''Official 2:32 A. M. Inter-Allied News: Tarrano rejects Ultimatum. His note to Earth Council complete defiance. Official text follows....''

We listened, dumb with amazement and awe. Tarrano's note was indeed, complete defiance. He would not yield up the Brende light. Nor would he deliver himself in Washington for trial. In the suave, courteous language of diplomacy, he deplored the unreasonable attitude of the Earth leaders. Ironically, he suggested that they declare war. He would be overwhelmed in Venia, of course. He had no means of defending himself against their aggression. But at the first flash of hostile rays, the Brende model would be destroyed forever. And Georg Brende—the only living person who had the knowledge to replace the model—would die instantly. The Brende secret would be lost irrevocably. It was unfortunate that humanity on Earth, Venus and Mars, should be denied their chance for immortality. Unfortunate that the Earth leaders were so headstrong. They were enemies, in reality, of their own people—and enemies of the peoples of Venus and Mars. But if the Earth Council wished war with Tarrano—then war let it be.

''A bluff,'' I exclaimed. ''He would lose everything himself. It's suicide—''

''Not suicide,'' Georg said soberly. ''Propaganda. Can't you see it? He knows the Earth Council will make no move until the ultimatum time has expired. Hours yet. And in those hours, he is working upon the publics of the three worlds.''

The announcer was silent again. Below us, in our tower, we heard a footstep. The barrage had been lifted to admit someone, then thrown on again. Measured footsteps were coming up our incline. We stood motionless, breathless. A moment; then into the room came Wolfgar. He did not speak. Advancing close to us as we stood transfixed, he jerked an instrument from his belt. It whirred and

hummed in his hand. The room around us went black—a barrage of blackness and silence, with ourselves and Wolfgar in a pale glow standing within it as in a cylinder. The isolation-barrage. I had never been within one before, though upon drastic occasion they were in official use.

Wolfgar said swiftly: "We cannot be seen or heard. I have been in charge of the mirror observing you—I have thrown it out of use. The Princess Maida—"

"You are—the friend?" Georg whispered tensely. Elza was trembling and I put my arm about her.

Wolfgar's face lightened with a brief smile; then went intensely serious. "Yes. A spy, trusted by Tarrano for years—but my heart is with the Princess Maida. We must escape—all of us—now, or it will be too late."

He stopped abruptly, and a look of consternation came to him. The black silence enveloping us had without warning begun to crackle. The metal cone in Wolfgar's hand glowed red with interference-heat—but he clung to it, though it burned him. Sparks were snapping in the blackness around us. Our isolation was dissolving. Someone—something—was breaking it down, struggling to get at us!

CHAPTER IX

Paralyzed!

The isolation barrage which Wolfgar had flung around us was dissolving. Someone—something—was in the room, breaking down the barrage, struggling to get at us. We stood huddled together; Elza clinging to me, Georg beside us, and Wolfgar, gripping the small cylinder which was glowing red in his hand from intense heat.

Georg muttered something; the snapping sparks of the barrage blurred his words. But I heard Wolfgar say swiftly:

"We're trapped! You, of all of us—you Georg Brende, must escape."

The rest of his words to Georg I did not catch. He was thrusting a weapon into Georg's hands; and giving hurried advice and explanations.

"Princess Maida ... she ... in that other tower ... you, so much more important than the rest of us...." Phrases I heard; but only phrases, for in those few seconds I stood dumbly confused, fascinated by watching the blackness in which we had enveloped ourselves now breaking into lurid, angry sparks.

A distant corner of the room became visible; outlines of the wall-beams; the growing glare of a wall-light in a tube over there. And through the brightening gloom—the figure of a lone man standing. Tarrano!

I heard Georg mutter: "Jac! Make a show of fight! Hold him! But careful—careful of Elza!"

Behind me there came an electrical flash; the pungent smell of burning cloth.

Georg was no longer beside us!

Elza was still clinging to me in fright. I shook her off. Wolfgar flung his smoking, useless cylinder to the floor. The blackness at once sprang into light; the sparks died. Tarrano was standing in the room, quietly, before us. Standing with a grim, cynical smile, regarding us.

But only for an instant did he stand quiet. Across the room, creeping for the balcony doorway, I was aware of the figure of Georg. Tarrano saw him also; and with a swift gesture snapped back to his belt the interference cylinder with which he had uncovered us; then plucked at another weapon, gripped it to turn it upon Georg.

Everything was happening too swiftly for coherent thought. I leaped toward Tarrano, with Wolfgar rushing beside me. Elza screamed. Tarrano's hand was leaving his belt. I reached him; flung out my fist for his face.

But in that instant the weapon in Tarrano's hand was brought upon me. My paralyzed muscles made my arm and fist go wide. My blow missed him; he stepped aside; and like a man drunk with baro-wine, I stumbled past him, halted, swayed and struggled to keep my footing.

Wolfgar had felt it also; he was reeling near me, holding himself from falling with difficulty. I was unarmed; but there were weapons hanging from Wolfgar's belt. His numbed fingers were groping for them. But the effort was too great. The blood, driven back from his arms, left them powerless; they fell dangling to his sides.

A few seconds; but we had occupied Tarrano during them. Georg was through the balcony doorway and beyond our sight. Elza was standing motionless, too frightened to move. I felt myself growing numb, weighted to the floor as though my feet had taken root. My arms were hanging like wood; fingers tingling, then growing cold, dead to sensation. And a numbness creeping up my legs; and spreading inward from my arms and shoulders. In a few moments more, I knew the numbness would reach my heart.

Tarrano had not moved, save that single step side-wise to avoid my onslaught. As I stood there now with my face like fire and my brain whirling with the blood congested in it, I heard his quiet voice:

"Do not fear, Lady Elza. This Jac Hallen—as I promised you—is quite safe with me."

His gesture waved her aside, that she should not come within those deadly vibrations he was flinging at us. And I saw his other hand lift a tiny mouthpiece from his belt; heard his voice say into it: "Argo? Argo! That Georg Brende——"

He stopped; a look of annoyance came over his face. Argo did not answer! Dimly to my fading senses came the triumphant thought, the realization that Argo outside, upon whom Tarrano depended to seize Georg—had failed.

Action had come to Tarrano. He snapped off his weapon. Released from it, Wolfgar and I wilted to the floor—lay inert. The returning blood in my limbs made them prick as with a million needles. To my sight and hearing, the room was whirling and roaring. I felt Tarrano bending swiftly over me; felt the forcible insertion of a branched metal tube in my nostrils; a hand over my mouth. I struggled to hold my breath—failed. Then inhaled with a gasp, a pungent, sickening-sweet gas. Roaring, clanging gongs sounded in my ears—roaring and clattering louder, then fading into silence. A wild, tumbling phantasmagoria of dreams. Then complete unconsciousness.

CHAPTER X

Georg Escapes

I come now to recount events at which I was not present, and the details of which I did not learn until later. Fronted by Tarrano, in those few seconds of confusion, Georg made his decision to escape even at the cost of leaving Elza and me. He murmured his hurried good-bye. The moment had arrived. He could see Tarrano dimly through the sparks. He leaped backward, through that wall of electrical disturbance which surrounded us. The sparks tore at him; burned his clothing and flesh; the shock of it gripped his heart. But he went through; crept for the balcony. It was dark out there. He would have rushed for Tarrano instead of the balcony, but as he came through the sparks he had seen that the barrier surrounding our tower was momentarily lifted. Argo had cut it off to admit Tarrano a few moments before. He had not yet replaced it—absorbed, doubtless, in watching in his finder what Tarrano was doing with us. He must have seen Georg reach the balcony; and jumped then to replace the barrier. But too late. Georg was over the balcony rail with a leap. The insulated tubes were there—upright gleaming tubes of metal extending downward to the platform below. Tubes smooth, and as thick as a woman's waist.

Georg slid down them. The barrage, above him on the balcony, had been replaced. He saw below him the figure of Argo come running out. A weapon in each hand. The burning pencil-ray swung at Georg, but missed him as he came down. Had it struck, it would have drilled him clean with its tiny hole of fire. Then Argo must have realized that Georg should be taken alive. He ran forward, swung up at Georg the paralyzing vibrations which Tarrano at that instant was using upon Wolfgar and me.

Georg felt them. He was ten feet, perhaps, above the lower platform; and as he felt the numbness strike him, he lost his hold upon the tube-pipe. But he had presence of mind enough to kick himself outward with a last effort. His body fell upon the onrushing Argo. They went down together.

Argo lay inert. The impact had knocked him senseless, and had struck his

weapon from his hand. Georg sat up, and for a moment chafed his tingling, prickling arms and legs. He was bruised and shaken by the fall, but uninjured.

Within our tower, Tarrano was still occupied with us. Georg leaped to his feet. He left Argo lying there—ran over the spider-bridge; down a spiral metal stairway, across another bridge, and came upon the small park-like platform which stood at the bottom of the other tower. He had passed within sight of a few pedestrians. One of them shouted at him; another had tried mildly to stop him. A crowd on a distant terrace saw him. A few of their personal flashes were turned his way. Murmurs arose. Someone at the head of one of the escalators, in a panic pulled an alarm-switch. It flared green into the sky, flashing its warning.

The interior-guards—seated at their instrument tables in the lower rooms of the official buildings—had seen Georg in their finders. The alarm was spreading. Lights were appearing everywhere.... The murmurs of gathering people ... excited crowds ... an absurd woman leaning down over a far-away parapet and screaming ... an ignorant, flustered street-guard on a nearby upper terrace swinging his pencil-ray down at Georg.... Fortunately it fell short.

For a moment Georg stood there, with the gathering tumult around him—stood there gazing up at that small tower. The tower wherein the Princess Maida was confined. It was dark and silent. Black rectangles of doors and casements, all open—but barred by the glow of the electrical barrage surrounding it.

Georg jerked from his belt the cylinder Wolfgar had given him. Metallic. Short, squat and ugly, with a thick, insulated handle. He feared to use it. Yet Wolfgar had assured him the Princess Maida was prepared. He hesitated, with his finger upon the switch-button of the weapon. But he knew that in a moment he would be too late. A searchlight from an aerial mast high overhead swung down upon him, bathing him in its glare of white.

His finger pressed the trigger. A soundless flash of purple enveloped the tower. Sparks mounted into the air—a cloud of vivid electrical sparks; but mingled with them in a moment were sparks also of burning wood and fibre. Smoke began to roll upward; the purple flash was gone, and dull red took its place. The hum and angry buzz of outraged electricity was stilled. Flames appeared at all the tower casements—red flames, then yellow with their greater heat.

The trim and interior of the tower was burning. The protons Georg had flung at it with his weapon had broken the electrical barrage. The interference heat had burned out the connections and fired everything combustible within the tower. A terrific heat. It began to melt and burn the blenite.[10] The upper portion of the tower walls began to crumble. Huge blocks of stone were shifting, tottering; and they began to fall through the glare of mounting flames and the thick black smoke.

[Footnote 10: A cement or mortar used in stone constructions—evidently partially combustible.]

Georg had tossed away his now useless weapon—emptied of its charge. He was crouching in the shadow of a parapet. The city was now in turmoil. Alarm lights everywhere. The shrilling of sirens; roaring of megaphoned commands ... women screaming hysterically....

A chaos, out of which, for a few moments, Georg knew no order could come. But his heart was in his mouth. The Princess Maida, within that burning building....

He had located the tiny postern gate at the bottom of the tower where Wolfgar had told him she would appear. The barrage was gone; and in a moment she came—a white figure appearing there amid the smoke that was rolling out.

He rushed to her. A figure wholly encased in white itan[11] fabric with head-mask, and tubes from its generator to supply her with air. Wolfgar had smuggled the equipment in to her for just this emergency. She stood awkwardly beside Georg—a grotesque figure hampered by the heavy costume. Its crescent panes of itanoid begoggled her.

[Footnote 11: A universal insulating fabric, as rubber insulates electricity and asbestos bars heat.]

Behind him, Georg could hear people advancing. A guard picked them out with a white flash. The mounting flames of the tower bathed everything in red. A block of stone fell near at hand, crashing through the metallic platform upon which they were standing. Broken, it sagged beneath their feet.

Georg tore at the girl's head-piece, lifted it off. Her face was pale, frightened, yet she seemed calm. Her glorious white hair tumbled down in waves over her shoulders.

"Wolfgar—he——" She choked a little in the smoke that swirled around them. Georg cut in: "He sent me—Georg Brende. Don't talk now—get this off."

He pulled the heavy costume from her. She emerged from it—slim and beautiful in the shimmering blue kirtle, with long grey stockings beneath.

A spider incline was nearby. But a dozen guards were coming up it at a run. With the girl's hand in his, Georg turned the other way. People were closing in all around them—an excited crowd held back by the heat of the burning tower, the smoke and the falling blocks of stone. Someone swung a pencil-ray wildly. It seared Georg like a branding-iron on the flesh of his arm as it swung past. He pulled Maida toward the head of an escalator a dozen feet away. Its steps were coming upward from the plaza at the ground level. Half way up, the first of an up-coming throng were mounting it.

But Georg again turned aside. He found Maida quick of wit to catch his plans; and agile of body to follow him. They climbed down the metal frame-work of the escalator sides; down under it to where the inverted steps were passing downward on the endless belts. Maida slid into one of them, with Georg after her, his arms holding her in place.

They huddled there. No one had seen them enter. Smoothly the escalator drew them downward. Above them in a moment the tramp of feet sounded close above their heads as the crowd rushed upward.

They approached the bottom, slid out upon a swinging bridge which chanced at the moment to be empty of people. Down it at a run; into the palm-lined plaza at the bottom of the city.

Down here it was comparatively dim and silent. The alarm lights of the plaza section had not yet come on; the excitement was concentrated upon the burning tower above. The crowd, rushing up there, left the plaza momentarily deserted. Georg and Maida crossed it at a run, scurried like frightened rabbits through a tunnel arcade, down a lower cross-street, and came at last unmolested to the outskirts of the city.

The buildings here were almost all at the ground level. Georg and Maida ran onward, hardly noticed, for everyone was gazing upward at the distant, burning tower. Georg was heading for where Wolfgar had an aero secreted. A mile or more. They reached the spot—but the aero was not there. They were in the open country now—Venia is small. Plantations—an agricultural region. Most of the houses were deserted, the occupants having fled into the city as refugees when threats and orders came from Washington the day before. Georg and Maida came upon a little conical house; it lay silent, heavy-shadowed in the starlight with the glow of the city edging its side and circular roof. Beside it was an incline with a helicopter standing up there on a private landing stage.... Georg and Maida rushed up the incline.

A small helicopter; its dangling basket was barely large enough for two—a basket with a tiny safety 'plane fastened to its outrigger.

In a moment Georg and the girl had boarded the helicopter. She was silent; she had hardly said a word throughout it all.... The helicopter mounted straight up; its whirling propellers above sent a rush of air downward.

"These batteries," said Georg. "The guards in Venia can't stop us. An aero—even if we had it—I doubt if we could get power for it. They've shut off general power by now, I'm sure."

She nodded. "Yes—no doubt."

As they mounted upward, the city dwindled beneath them—dwindled to an area of red and green and purple lights. It was silent up here in the starlight; a calm, windless night—cloudless, save for a gray bank which obscured the moon.

Ten thousand feet up. Then fifteen. The city was a tiny patch of blended colors. Light rockets occasionally mounted now. But their glare fell short. Georg's mind was busy with his plans. Had the helicopter been seen? It seemed not. No rocket-light had reached it; and there was no sign of pursuit from below.

Maida crouched beside him. He felt her hand timidly upon his arm; felt her

shy, sidelong glance upon him. And suddenly he was conscious of her beauty. His heart leaped, and as he turned to her, she smiled—a smile of eager trust which lighted her face like a torch of faith in the spire of a house of worship.

"You are planning?" she said. "You know what it is we must do?"

He said: "I think so. The volan[12] out there is large enough for two. You'll trust yourself to it with me? You're not afraid, are you?"

[Footnote 12: A small winged board without power, used for emergency descents by volplaning down from disabled aeros.]

"Oh, no," she said. "What you say we must do, we will do."

"We must go higher, Maida. Then, you see...."

He told her his plans. And mounting up there into the silent canopy of stars, his fingers wound themselves into the soft strands of her hair which lay upon him; and his heart beat fast with the nearness of her.... Told her his plans, and she acquiesced.

Twenty thousand feet. The cold was upon them. Shivering himself, he wrapped her in a fur which the basket contained. At 25,000, they took to the vol plan. It was a padded board a dozen feet long and half as wide. Released, it shot downward; a hundred feet or more, with the heavens whirling soundlessly. Then Georg got the wings open; the descent was checked; the stars righted themselves above, and once again the earth was beneath.

They had strapped themselves to the board, and now Georg undid the thongs. Together they lay prone, side by side, with the narrow, double-banked wings beneath the line of their shoulders, and the rudder-tail behind them. Flexible 'planes and tail, responding to Georg's grip on the controls.

Fluttering, uncertain at first, like a huge bird of quivering wings, they began their incline descent. A spiral, then Georg opened it to a straight glide northward—rushing downward and onward through the starlight, in a wind of their own making which fluttered the light fabric of Maida's robe and tossed her waves of hair about her.

A long, silent glide, with only the rush of wind. It seemed hours, while the girl did not speak and Georg anxiously searched the sky ahead. Underneath them, the dark forests were slipping past; but inexorably coming upward. They were down to 5,000 feet; then Georg saw at last what he had hoped, prayed for, but almost despaired of. A beam of light to the northward—the spreading beam of an oncoming patrol. It was high overhead; but it came forward fast. A sweeping, keenly searching beam, and finally it struck them. Clung to them.

And presently the big patrol vessel was almost above them. It hung there, a dark winged shape dotted with colored lights. A signal flash—a sharp command to Georg, but, of course, he could not answer. Then the Director's finder picked him out. The volan was fluttering, spiralling slowly as Georg struggled to hold his

place.

And then the patrol launched its tender. It came darting down like a wasp. A moment more, and Georg and Maida were taken aboard it. The volan fluttered to the forest unguided and was lost in the black treetops, now no more than a thousand feet below.

Surrounded by amazed officials, Maida and Georg entered the patrol vessel. Georg Brende, escaped safely from Tarrano! The Brende secret released from Tarrano's control! The Director flashed the news to Washington and to Great London. Orders came back. A score of other vessels of this Patrol-Division came dashing up—a convoy which soon was speeding northward to Washington with its precious messenger.

CHAPTER XI

Recaptured

In Washington during those next few days, events of the Earth, Venus and Mars swirled and raged around Georg as though he were engulfed in the Iguazu or Niagara. Passive himself at first—a spectator merely; yet he was the keystone of the Earth Council's strength. The Brende secret was desired by the publics of all three worlds. Even greater than its real value as a medical discovery, it swayed the popular mind.

Tarrano possessed the Brende secret. The only model, and Dr. Brende's notes were in his hands. Washington had ordered him to give them up, and he had refused. But now the status was changed. Georg held the secret also—and Georg was in Washington. It left the Earth Council free to deal with Tarrano.

During those days Georg was housed in official apartments, with Maida very often near him. Inactive, they were much together, discussing their respective worlds. The Princess Maida was hereditary ruler of the Venus Central State—the only living heir to the throne. When Tarrano's forces threatened revolution from the Cold Country she had been seized by spies, brought to Earth, to Tarrano in Venia, and imprisoned in the tower from which Georg had so lately rescued her. Wolfgar for years had been her friend and loyal retainer, though he had pretended service to Tarrano.

In the Central State, Maida, too young to rule, had been represented by a Council. The public loved her—but a majority of it had gone astray when she disappeared—lured by Tarrano's glowing promises.

Maida told Georg all this with a sweet, gentle sadness that was pathetic. And with an earnest, patriotic fervor—the love of her country and her people for whom she would give her life.

She added: "If only I could get back there, Georg—I could make them realize the right course. I could win them again. Tarrano will play them false—you know

it, and so do I.''

Pathetic earnestness in this girl still no more than seventeen! And Georg, sitting beside her, gazing into her solemn, beautiful face, felt that indeed she could win them, with those limpid blue eyes and her words which rang with sincerity and truth.

They sat generally in an unofficial instrument room adjoining the government offices. A room high in a spire above the upper levels of the city. And around them rolled the momentous events of which they were the center.

The time limit of the Earth Council's ultimatum to Tarrano expired. Already Tarrano had answered it with defiance. But on the stroke of its expiration, came another note from him. Georg read it from the tape to Maida:

''To the Earth Council from Tarrano, its loyal subject——''

A grimly ironical note, yet so worded that the ignorant masses would not see its irony. It stated that Tarrano could not comply with the demand that he deliver himself and the Brende model to Washington because he did not have the model. It was on its way to Venus. He now proposed to recall it. He had already recalled it, in fact. He assured the Council that it was now on its way back, direct to Washington. He had done this because he felt that the Earth leaders were making a mistake—a grave mistake in the interests of their own people. Georg Brende was in Washington—that was true. But Georg Brende was a silly, conceited young man, flattered by his prominence in the public eye, his head turned by his own importance. Dr. Brende had been a genius. The son was a mere upstart, pretending to a scientific knowledge he did not have.

''Trickery!'' exclaimed Georg. ''But he knows the people may believe it. Some of them undoubtedly will.''

''And you cannot thwart your public,'' Maida said. ''Even your Earth Council, secure in its power, cannot do that.''

''Exactly,'' Georg rejoined. He was indignant, as well he might have been. ''Tarrano is trying to avoid being attacked. Time—any delay—is what he wants.''

The note went on. Tarrano—seeking only the welfare of the people—could not stand by and see the Earth Council wreck its public. Tarrano had reconsidered his former note. The Brende model was vital, and since the Earth Council demanded the model (for the benefit of its people) the people should have it. In a few days it would be in Washington. Tarrano himself would not come to Washington. His doing that could not help the public welfare, and he was but human. The Earth Council had made itself his enemy; he could not be expected to trust his life in enemy hands.

The note closed with the suggestion that the Council withdraw its patrol from Venia. This talk of war was childish. Withdraw the patrol, and Tarrano himself might go back to Venus. He would wait a day for answer to this request; and if it were not

granted—if the patrol were not entirely removed—then the Brende model would be destroyed. And if the publics of three worlds wished to depend upon a conceited, ignorant young man like Georg Brende for the everlasting life, they were welcome to do so.

A clever piece of trickery, and it was awkward to deal with. One had only to watch its effect upon the public to realize how insidious it was. Tarrano had told us—in the tower in Venia: "I shall have to bargain with them." And chuckled as he said it.

A series of notes from the Earth Council and back again, followed during the next few days. But the patrol was not withdrawn; nor was war declared. The Earth Council knew that Tarrano had not ordered the model back—nor would he destroy it. Yet if the Earth forces were to overwhelm Tarrano, and the model were lost, a revolution upon Earth could easily take place before Georg could convince the people that he was able to build them another model.

This delay—while Tarrano was held virtually a prisoner in Venia—was decided upon at the instigation of Georg himself. He—Georg—would address the publics of the three worlds. With Maida beside him to influence her own public in Venus, they would convince everyone that Georg had the secret—and that he alone would use it for the public good.

Youthful plans! Youthful enthusiasm! The belief that they could win confidence to their cause by the very truthfulness in their hearts! The belief that right makes might—which Tarrano would have told them was untrue!

Yet it was a good plan, and the Earth Council approved it, since it could do no harm to try. And it perhaps would have been successful but for one thing, of which even at that moment I—in Venia—was aware. Tarrano's trickery was not all on the surface. He had written into that note—by a code of diabolically ingenious wording—a secret message to his own spies in Washington. Commands for them to obey. A dozen of his spies were in the Earth government's most trusted, highest service—and some of them were there in Washington, close around Georg and Maida as they made their altruistic plan.

The attempt was to be made from the high-power sending station in the mountains of West North America.[13] Our observatory was there; and the only one of its kind on the Earth. It was equipped to send a radio voice audibly to every part of the Earth; and by helio, also to Mars and Venus, there to be re-transformed from light to sound and heard throughout those other worlds. And moving images of the speakers, seen on the finders all over the Earth, Venus and Mars simultaneously. The power, the generating equipment was at this station; and no matter where in the sky Venus or Mars might be, from the Mountain Station the vibrations of mingled light and sound were relayed elsewhere on Earth to other stations from which the helios could be flashed direct.

[Footnote 13: The Rocky Mountains, in the United States or possibly Alberta.]

To Skylan, as the Mountain Station was popularly called, Georg and Maida were taken in official aero under heavy convoy. Yet, even then, at their very elbows, spies of Tarrano must have been lurking.

The official flyer landed them on the broad stage amid deep, soft snow. It was night—a brief trip from the late afternoon, through dinner and they were there. A night of clear shining stars—brilliant gems in deep purple. Clear, crisp, rarefied air; a tumbling expanse of white, with the stars stretched over it like a close-hung canopy.

They were ushered into the low, rambling building. The attempt was to be made at once. Mars was mounting the eastern sky; and to the west, Venus was setting. Both visible from direct helios at that moment—Red Mars, from this mountain top, glowing like the tip of an arrant-cylinder up there.

In the brief time since the party had left Washington, the worlds had been notified. The eyes and ears of the millions of three planets were waiting to see and hear this Georg Brende and this Princess Maida.

The sending room was small, circular, and crowded with apparatus. And above its dome, opened to the sky, wherein the intensified helios shaded so that no ray of them might blind the operators, were sputtering as though eager to be away with their messages.

With a dozen officials around him, Georg prepared to enter the sending room. He had parted from Maida a few moments before, when she had left him to be shown to her apartment by the women attendants.

As she moved away, on impulse he had stopped her. "We shall succeed, Maida."

Her hand touched his arm. A brave smile, a nod, and she had passed on, leaving him standing there gazing after her with pounding heart. Pounding, not with excitement at the task before him in that sending room; pounding with the sudden knowledge that the welfare of this frail little woman meant more to him than the safety of all these worlds.

At last Georg stood in the sending room. The officials sat grouped around him. Maida had not yet arrived from her apartment. There was a small platform, upon which she and Georg were to stand together. He took his place upon it, waiting for her.

Before him was the sending disc; it glowed red as they turned the current into it. Then they illumined the mirrors; a circle of them, each with its image of Georg upon the platform. The white lights above him flashed on, beating down upon him with their hot, dazzling glare. The reflected beams from the mirrors, struck upward into the dome overhead. The helios up there were humming and sputtering loudly.

Beyond the circle of intense white light in which Georg was standing, the spectators sat in gloom behind the mirrors. Maida had not come. The Skylan Director, impatient ordered a woman to go for her.

Then, suddenly, Georg said to this Director:

"I—these lights—this heat. It makes me feel faint—standing here."

Georg had stumbled from the platform. Between two of the mirrors, shaded from the glare, the perturbed Director met him. Moisture beaded Georg's forehead.

"I'll—be quite all right in a moment. I'm going over there." He smiled weakly. A dozen feet away there was an opened outer casement. It looked down twenty feet, perhaps, to the deep snow that covered the station's grounds. The Director started with Georg; but Georg pushed him violently away.

"No! No! You let me alone!" His accents were those of a spoiled child. The Director hesitated, and Georg, with a hand to his forehead, wavered toward the casement. The Director saw him standing there; saw him sway, then fall or jump forward, and disappear.

They rushed outside. The snow was trampled all about with heavy footprints, but Georg had vanished. From the women's apartment, the attendant came back. The Princess Maida could not be found!

And in those moments of confusion, from outside across the starlit snow, an aero was rising. Silent, black—and no one saw it as it winged away into the night.

CHAPTER XII

Tara

I must revert now to those moments in the tower room when Tarrano dissolved the isolation barrage which Wolfgar had thrown around us. Georg escaped, as I have recounted. Tarrano—there in the tower room—rendered me unconscious. I came to myself on the broad divan and found Elza bending over me.

I sat up, dizzily, with the room reeling.

"Jac! Jac, dear——" She made me lie back, until I could feel the blood returning to my clammy face; and the room steadied, and the clanging of the gongs in my ears died away.

"I—why, I'm—all right," I gasped. And I lay there, clinging to her hand. Dear little Elza! In that moment of relief that I had come to my senses, she could not hide the love which even now was unspoken between us. Tarrano! I lay there weak and faint; but with the pressure of Elza's hand, I did not fear that this Tarrano could win her from me.

Wolfgar was standing across the room from us. He came forward.

"You did not die," he said; and smiled. "I told her you would not die."

It was now morning. Wolfgar and Elza told me I had been unconscious some hours. We were still imprisoned as before in the tower. Georg had escaped with Maida, they said; or at least, they hoped so. And they described the burning of the other tower. The city had been in a turmoil. It still was; I could hear now the shouts of the crowd outside. And turning as I lay there, through the casement I could see the blackened, still smoking ruins of Maida's tower; the broken iron terrace; the spider bridge melted away, hanging loose and dangling like an aimless pendulum.

The latest news, Elza and Wolfgar could not give me. The instrument room of our tower had been disconnected by Tarrano when he left some hours before. As they said it, we heard a familiar buzz; then the drone of an announcer's voice. Tarrano's guard had doubtless observed my recovery and had had orders to throw current into our instruments. Strange man, this Tarrano! He wished the news spread before us again. Confident of his own dominance over every crisis, he wanted Elza and me to hear it as it came from the discs.

We went to the instrument room. I found myself weak, but quite uninjured. Elza left us there, and went to prepare food which I needed to strengthen me.

The public events of those hours and days following, I have recounted as Georg saw them and took part in them in Washington. We observed them, here in the tower, with alternate hopes and fears. Our life of imprisonment went on much as before. Occasionally, Tarrano visited us, always making us sit like children before him, while at his ease he reclined on our divan.

But he would never give us much real information; the man always was an enigma.

"Your friend Georg has a wonderful plan," he announced to us ironically early one evening. He smiled his caustic smile. "You have seen the tape?"

"Yes," I said. It was Georg's plan to address with Maida, the publics of Earth, Venus and Mars.

Tarrano nodded. "He and the Princess are going to convince everyone that I am an impostor."

I did not answer that; and abruptly he chuckled. "That would be unfortunate for me—if they could do that. Do you think they'll be able to?"

"I hope so," I said.

He laughed openly. "Of course. But they will not. That long note of mine to your government—you read it, naturally. But you didn't read in it my secret instructions to my agents in Washington, did you? Well, they were there in it—my commands—the letters ending its words made another message."

He was amused at our discomfiture. "Simple enough? Yet really an intricate code in itself. It made the phrasing of the main note a little difficult to compose, that was all." He sat up with his accustomed snap of alertness, and his face turned

grim. "Georg will never address his audience. Nor the Princess—she will never appear before those sending mirrors. I have seen to that." Again he was chuckling. "No, no, I could not let them do a thing like that. They might turn people against me."

Elza began indignantly: "You—you are——"

His gesture checked her. "Your brother is quite safe, Lady Elza. And the Princess Maida also. Indeed, they are on the point of falling in love with each other. Natural! And perfectly right. It is as I would have it."

His strong brown fingers were rubbing each other with his satisfaction. "Curious, Lady Elza—how fortunate I am in all my plans."

"I don't think you are," I said. "Our government has you a prisoner here. They didn't withdraw the patrol as you demanded, did they?"

He frowned a trifle. "No. That was too bad. I rather hoped they would. It would have been a stupid thing for them to do—but still, I almost thought they'd do it."

I shook my head. "What they will do is sweep down here and overwhelm you."

"You think so?"

"Yes."

He shifted himself to a more comfortable position. "They are playing for time—so that when I fail to produce the model as I agreed, then the public will realize I am not to be trusted."

"Exactly," I said.

"Well, I am playing for time, also."

He seemed so willing to discuss the thing that I grew bolder.

"What have you to gain by playing for time?" I demanded.

He stared. "You would question me, Jac Hallen? How absurd!" He looked at Elza, as though to share with her his amazement at my temerity.

Wolfgar said suddenly to Tarrano: "You will gain nothing."

Tarrano's face went impassive. I understood him better now; that cold, inscrutable look often concealed his strongest emotions. He said evenly:

"I should prefer you not to address me, Wolfgar. A traitor such as you—the sound of your voice offends me."

It struck me then as very strange—as it had for days before—that Tarrano should have failed to punish Wolfgar. I would have expected death; least of all, that Tarrano would have allowed Wolfgar to live here in the tower, in comparative ease and comfort. Tarrano's words now answered my unspoken questions. He was not looking at Wolfgar, but at Elza.

"You, Wolfgar—deserve death. You know why I cannot kill you? Why I let you stay here in the tower?" A faint, almost wistful smile parted his thin lips; he did not

take his eyes from Elza.

"I am greatly handicapped, Wolfgar. The Lady Elza here would not like to have me put you to death. She would not even care to have me mistreat you. She is very tender hearted." He raised a deprecating hand. "Ah, Lady Elza, does that surprise you? You never told me I must be lenient with this traitor? Of course not."

"I——" Elza began, but he stopped her.

"You see, Lady Elza, I have already learned to obey you." He was smiling very gently. "Learned to obey even your unspoken commands."

I wondered how much of this attitude might be sincere, and how much calculated trickery. Could Elza, indeed, control him?

She must have had much the same thought, for she said with a forced smile: "You give me a great deal of power. If you—wish to obey me, you'll set us free—send us all to Washington."

That amused him. "Ah, but I cannot do that."

She gained confidence. "You are willing to be very gracious in things which do not inconvenience you, Tarrano. It is not very impressive."

He looked hurt. "You misinterpret. I will do for you anything I can. But you must remember, Lady Elza, that my judgment is better than yours. I would not let you lead us into disaster. You are a gentle little woman. Your instincts are toward humane treatment of everyone—toward mercy rather than justice. In all such things, I shall be guided by you. Justice—tempered with mercy. A union very, very beautiful, Lady Elza ... But, you see, beyond that—you are wrong. I am a man, and in the big things I must dominate. It is I who guide, and you who follow. You see that, don't you?"

The sincerity in his voice was unmistakable. And my heart sank as I watched Elza. Her gaze fell, and a flush mantled her cheeks. Tarrano added quietly: "We shall have no difficulty, you and I, Lady Elza. Each of us a place, and a duty. A destiny together...."

He broke off and rose quickly to his feet. "Enough. I have been weak to say so much as this."

He turned to leave us, and I became aware of a woman's figure standing in the shadows of the archway across the room. She started forward as Tarrano glanced her way. A Venus woman of the Cold Country. Yet, obviously, one of good birth and breeding. A woman of perhaps 30 years, beautiful in the Venus cast; dressed in the conventional bodice breast-plates and short skirt, with grey stockings and sandals.

Within the room, she regarded Tarrano silently. There was about her a quiet dignity; she stood with her tall, slim figure drawn to its full height. Her pure white hair was coiled upon her head, with a rich metal ornament to fasten it. And from it,

a mantle of shimmering blue fabric hung down her back.

Tarrano said: "What are you doing up here? I told you to wait below."

Her face showed no emotion. But there was a glitter to her eyes, a glow in their grey depths like alumite in the hydro-flame of a torch.

She said slowly: "Master, I think it would be very correct if you would let me stay here and serve the Lady Elza. I told you that before, but you would not listen."

Tarrano, with sudden decision, swung toward Elza. "This is the Elta[14] Tara. She was concerned that I should allow you to dwell here alone with this Jac Hallen, and this traitor from Mars." His tone conveyed infinite contempt for us.

[Footnote 14: Elta—a term or title denoting rank by birth.]

The woman said quickly: "The Lady Elza would be glad of my companionship." She shot a swift glance to Elza. What it was meant to convey, I could not have said. Perhaps Elza understood it, or thought she did. She spoke up.

"I would like to have you very much, indeed." She added to Tarrano, and there was on her face a look of feminine guile:

"You, of course, could not refuse me so small a favor? After all your protestations——"

He gestured impatiently. "Very well." And he added to Tara: "You will serve the Lady Elza as she directs."

He stalked away into the darkened passage. In the gloom there, he stopped and again faced us; the light from a small blue tube in there illumined him dimly. He was smiling ironically.

"I shall maintain the instruments for you. The mirrors will show you Georg and Maida. They are just about arriving at the Mountain Station. Watch them! You will see how far they progress with their wonderful speeches."

He left us. We heard his measured tread as he stalked down the tower incline. The barrage about the tower was lifted momentarily as he went out. Then it came on again, with its glow beyond our casements, and its low electrical whine.

I was just turning back to the room when a sound behind me made me face sharply about. My heart leaped into my throat. The woman Tara had produced from about her person a weapon of some kind. She thought she was unobserved, but from the angle at which I stood, I saw her. A gleaming metal object was in her hand. And then she launched it—a small flat disc of metal, thin, and with its circular edge keen as a knife-blade.

Whirling with a very soft hum hardly audible, it left her hand and floated upward across the room. Circling the casements up near the ceiling, and then heading downward straight for Elza! And I saw, too, that the woman was guiding it by a tiny radio-control.

The thing was so unexpected that I stood gaping. But only for an instant. I saw

the deadly whirling knife-disc sailing for Elza.... It would strike her ... shear her white throat....

With a shout of horror and anger, I leaped for the woman. But Wolfgar, too, had seen the disc and he went into action quicker than I. The divan was beside him. He snatched up a pillow; flung it upward at the disc. The soft pillow struck the disc; together, entangled, they fell harmlessly to the floor.

I was upon the woman, snatching the handle of the control-wire from her hand, wrenching its connection loose from her robe. Under my onslaught, she fell; and I kneeled beside her, gripping her while she tore at me and screamed with hysterical, murderous frenzy.

CHAPTER XIII

Love—and Hate

I did not harm this Tara, though I was sorely tempted to; and after a moment we quieted her. She was crying and laughing by turns; but when we seated her on the divan she controlled herself and fell into a sullen silence. Elza, pale and frightened at her escape, faced the woman, and waved Wolfgar and me aside. Strange little Elza! Resolute, she stood there, and would brook no interference with her purpose. Wolfgar and I withdrew a pace or two and stood watching them.

Tara's breast was heaving with her pent emotion. She sat drooping on the divan, her face buried in her hands.

Elza said gently: "Why did you do that, Tara?"

There was no answer; only the woman's catching breath as she struggled with her sobs. Across the background of my consciousness came the thought that Tarrano or one of his guards would doubtless momentarily appear to investigate all this turmoil. And I was vaguely conscious also that from our instrument room the sounds of an unusual activity were coming. But I did not heed them. Elza was insisting:

"Why did you do that, Tara? Why should you want to harm me?"

Tara looked up. "You have stolen the man I love."

"I?"

"Yes. Tarrano——"

She broke off, set her lips firmly together as though to repress further words; and her fine grey eyes, filled with unbidden tears, were smoldering to their depths with hate.

Impulsively Elza sank to the floor beside the woman. But Tara drew away.

Elza said: "Tarrano—he is a wonderful man, Tara. A genius—the greatest figure of these three worlds...."

My heart sank to hear her say it!

"... a genius, Tara. You should be proud to love him...."

"You——" The woman's writhing fingers seemed about to reach for Elza. I took a sudden step forward, then relaxed. Elza added quickly:

"But I would not steal Tarrano from you. Don't you realize that?"

"No!"

"But it's true."

"No! No! You have stolen him! With your queer Earth beauty—that colored hair of yours—those rounded limbs—you've bewitched him! I can see it. You can't lie to me! I made him angry once and he admitted it."

"No, I tell you!"

"I say yes. You've stolen him from me. He loves you—and he mocks and laughs at me——"

"Tara, wait. I do not love Tarrano, I tell you. I would not have him——" How my heart leaped to hear her say it so convincingly. She added:

"He loves me, perhaps—but I can't help that. He has me prisoner here. I am forced—"

"You lie! You are playing to win him! What girl would refuse? You say yourself he is the greatest man of the ages. You lie when you tell me you do not want him!"

Elza had taken the woman by the shoulders. "Tara, listen—you must listen! Are you mated with Tarrano?"

"No! But years ago he promised me. I took his name then, as we do in the Cold Country. They still call me Tara! Years I have waited, true to my promise—with even my name of maidenhood relinquished. His name—Tara! And now he tosses me aside—because you, only an Earth woman, have bewitched him."

"I didn't want to bewitch him, Tara." Elza's voice was very gentle; and a whimsical smile was plucking at her lips. "You think I want him because he is a genius—the greatest man of our time?"

"Yes!"

"Is that why you want him?"

"No, I love him."

"You loved him before he was very great, didn't you?"

"Yes. Back in the Cold Country. When he was only a boy—and I was no more than a girl half grown. I love him for himself, I tell you——"

Elza interrupted; and her voice risen to greater firmness, held a quality of earnest pleading.

"Wait, Tara! You love Tarrano for himself—because you are a woman capable of love. It is the man you love—not his deeds, or his fame or his destiny. Isn't that so?"

"Yes. I——"

"Then won't you give me credit for being a woman with instincts as fine as your own? The love of a good woman goes unbidden. You can't win it by conquering worlds and flinging them at her feet. Tarrano thinks you can. He thinks to dazzle me with his feats of prowess. He wants to buy my love with thrones for me to grace as queen. He thinks my awe and fear of him are love. He thinks a woman's love is born of respect, and admiration, and promises of wealth. But you and I, Tara—we know it isn't. We know it's born of a glance—born in poverty and sickness—adversity—every ill circumstance—born without reason—for no reason at all. Just born! And if anything else gives it birth—it is not a true woman's love. You and I know that, Tara. Don't you see?"

Tara was sobbing unrestrainedly now, and Elza, with arms around her, went on:

"You should be proud to love Tarrano. If I loved him, I would be proud of him, too. But I do not——"

A step sounded near at hand. Tarrano stood in the archway, with arms folded, regarding us sardonically.

CHAPTER XIV

Defying Worlds

"So?" Tarrano eyed us, evidently in no hurry to speak further, seemingly amused at our confusion. Had he heard much of what the two women had said? All of it, or most of it, doubtless, with his instruments as he approached. But, even with the knowledge of Elza's vehement appraisal of him, he seemed now quite imperturbable. His gaze touched me and Wolfgar, then returned to the women.

"So? It would seem, Tara, that your plan to wait upon the Lady Elza was not very successful." He dropped the irony, adding crisply: "Tara, come here!"

She rose to her feet obediently, and stood facing him. Humble, fearful, yet a trifle defiant. For a moment he frowned upon her thoughtfully; then he said to Elza:

"Your policy of mercy is very embarrassing, Lady Elza." He made a deprecating gesture, and again his eyes were twinkling. "This woman threatened your life. My guards were lax—though I must admit they had good excuse, with the other tasks which I thrust upon them.... Your life was threatened—you escaped by the merest chance of fortune. You know, of course, what justice would bid me do to this would-be murderess?"

Elza was on her feet, standing beside Tara. She did not answer.

Tarrano now was smiling. "I must let her go unpunished? Embarrassing, this merciful policy to which you have committed me! Yet—your will is my law as you

know—though I feel that some day it will involve us in disaster.... You, Tara, will not be punished, much as you deserve it.'' He paused, then said as an afterthought: ''You, Jac Hallen, I thank you for what you tried to do in thwarting the attack. You acted in very clumsy fashion—but, at least, you doubtless did your best.'' Gravely he turned to Wolfgar. ''I shall not forget, Wolfgar, that, in an emergency, you saved the life of Lady Elza.... Enough! These are busy moments. You chose an awkward time to raise this turmoil. Come with me—all of you.''

He summoned Argo and two other guards. Unceremoniously, and with more haste than I had ever seen in Tarrano, he led us from the building. A hint of his purpose came to me, as he bade Elza gather up her few personal belongings, and gave them to a guard to carry.

In a group, he herded us across the spider bridge. It was early evening, but night had fully fallen. The city was ablaze with its colored lights. We crossed the bridge, passed through a tunnel-arcade, and came out to a platform which was at the base of a skeleton tower. Its naked girders rose some seven hundred feet above us. The highest structure in the city. A waiting lifting-car was there. We entered, and it shot us upward.

At the top, the narrowed structure was enclosed into a single room some thirty feet square. A many-windowed room, with a small metal balcony surrounding it outside. Immediately above the room, at the very peak of the tower, was a single, powerful light-beam; its silver searching ray swept the cloudless, starry sky in a slow circle.

The room was crowded with instruments. Unlighted, save by the reflected glow of its many image-mirrors, all of which seemed in full operation. A dozen intent men sat at the tables; a silent room, but for the hum and click of the instruments.

Tarrano said softly: ''We have been very busy while you below were engaged with your petty hates.''

He seated himself at a table apart, upon which was a single mirror, and he gathered us around him. The mirror was dark. He called:

''Rax—let me see Mars—you have them by relay? The Hill City?''

The mirror flashed on. From an aperture overhead, a tiny beam of the blue helio-transformer came down to it. In the mirror I saw an image of the familiar Hill City. A terraced slope, dotted with the cubical buildings, spires and tunnel mouths. An empty channel[15] curved down across the landscape from the north.

[Footnote 15: Canal, as it now is thought to be.]

A distant scene, empty and lifeless save for black puffs which rose in the air above the city.

Tarrano called impatiently: ''Closer, Rax!''

The image dissolved, blurred; turned red, violet, then white. We seemed now

upon a height close above the city. It was seething with confusion. Fighting going on in the streets. Animals and men, fighting; a crowd of the Little People thronging a public square, with beasts of war charging them.

The Hairless Men; I had heard of them, with their animals trained to fight, while they—the humans—lurked behind. A mysterious, almost grewsome race, to us who live on Earth—these hairless dwellers of the underground Mars. Dead-white of skin; sleek and hairless; heavily muscled from the work of their world; and almost blind from living in the dark.

They were swarming now into the Hill City of the ruling Little People. The beasts, at their commands, were running wild through the streets ... dripping jaws, tearing at the women ... the children....

I felt Elza turn away, shuddering.

Tarrano chuckled. "The revolt. It came, of course, as I planned. This Little People government—it was annoying ... Colley!"

"Master?"

"Send the message, Colley. Fling it audibly over Mars! Tell the rulers of the Little People that if they send up the green bomb of surrender—Tarrano will spare them further bloodshed. Tell them that I am not giving the Brende secret to Earth. In a moment I shall defy the Earth Council. Promise them that the Brende secret is going to Mars. Assure them they will have everlasting life for everyone.... Wohl!"

"Master?"

"Give me the Cave Station."

The mirror went dark. Then it turned a dazzling yellow. A cavern in the interior of Mars. A dark scene of wavering yellow torches. Around a table of instruments sat a score of hairless men. Tarrano snatched up a mouthpiece—murmured slowly into it. I could see the leader of the hairless men nod after a time, as the message reached him. And I saw him turn away to issue swift orders as Tarrano had commanded.

Tarrano said brusquely: "Enough!... Wohl!"

The mirror went dark. A voice called: "Master, the green bomb has gone up from the Hill City! Do you wish to see?"

"No.... Give me Venus. Olgan! Are they quiet on Venus?"

"Yes, Master."

"Congratulate them that we have conquered the Little People. Tell them Mars is ours now! Tell them I am coming to Venus at once—with the Brende model...."

"Master, you wish to see Venus? I have direct communication——"

Another voice interrupted. "The Earth Council, Master! They demand an explanation of why you say the Brende model is going to Mars. You have promised it to Earth. They demand——"

Tarrano rasped: "Tell them to wait ... I don't want Venus, Olgan.... Megar! Give me the Earth Mountain Station."

He turned to me, and his voice dropped again to that characteristic sardonic drawl:

"We must see how your friend Georg Brende is faring."

The mirror showed Georg, standing irresolute on the platform before the sending discs.

Tarrano called: "The Princess Maida—can't you locate her?"

The scene blurred momentarily, then showed us the outside of the Station. A white expanse of snow, with purple starlit sky above. From a side door of the building, as we watched, the figures of two women appeared. A woman leading Maida. As they came out, with Maida all unsuspecting, from the shadows a group of men pounced upon them—dragged Maida away.

Tarrano laughed. "Enough!... Show me Georg Brende again.... Hurry!"

We saw Georg waver and leap through the window, fall into the snow, where, from the shadows of the building, other men rushed out upon him ... hurried him away after the captive Maida....

Tarrano's laugh was grim and triumphant. "Ha! We win there, also! Enough! Nunz? Nunz—now you can give me the Earth Council! Where is it sitting? Washington, or Great London?"

"Washington, Master."

"Very well.... No, never mind connecting me. You speak for me. Tell them I've changed my mind. The Brende model is not coming to Washington. Tell them Georg Brende is lost to them, also. Tell them I declare war! Tarrano the Conqueror declares war on the Earth! Tell them that, with my compliments. Tell them to come down here and overwhelm me—it ought to be very easy!"

CHAPTER XV

Escape

That Tarrano should thus defy the Earth, when by every law of rational circumstance the move seemed to spell only his own disaster, was characteristic of the man. He stood there in the instrument room at the peak of the skeleton tower in Venia and rasped out to the Earth Council his defiance. Silence followed—silence unbroken save by the hiss and click of the instruments as the message was sent.

And then Tarrano ordered thrown upon himself the lights and sending mirrors so that his own image might be available to all of the public and Earth officials who cared to look upon it. Within the circle of mirrors he stood drawn to his full height; his eyes flashing, heavy brows lowered, and a sardonic smile—almost a leer—pulling at his thin lips. The embodiment of defiance. Yet to those who knew

him well—as I was beginning to know him—there was in his eyes a gleam of irony, as though even in this situation he saw humor. A game, with worlds and nations as his pawns—a game wherein, though he had apparently lost, with the confidence of his genius he knew that the hidden move he was about to make would extricate him.

"Enough," he rasped.

The mirrors went dark. He turned away; and still without appearance of haste he drew Wolfgar, Elza and me to the balcony. Together we stood gazing over the lights of the city below us.

A cloudless, starry sky. Empty of air-craft; but to the north just below the horizon, we knew that the line of war vessels was hovering. Even now, doubtless, they had their orders to descend upon us. Tarrano seemed waiting, and I suppose we stood there half an hour. Occasionally he would sight an instrument toward the north; and by the orders he gave at intervals I knew that preparations for action on his part were under way.

Half an hour. Then abruptly from below the northern horizon lights came up—spreading colored beams. The Earth war vessels! A line of them as far as we could see from left to right, mounting up into the sky as they winged their way toward us—a line spreading out in a broad arc. And then, behind us, I saw others appear. We were surrounded.

It was a magnificent, awe-inspiring sight, that vast ring of approaching colored lights. Red, green and purple—slowly moving eyes. Light-rockets sometimes mounting above them, to burst with a soundless glare of white light in the sky; and underneath, the spreading white search-beams, sweeping down to the dark forest that lay all about us.

Soon, in the white glare of the bombs, we could distinguish the actual shapes of the vessels. Still Tarrano did not move from his place by the balcony rail. He stood there, with a hand contemplatively under his chin, as though absorbed by an interest in the scene purely impersonal. Was he going to give himself up? Stand there inactive while these armed forces of the most powerful world in the Solar System swept down upon him?

Abruptly he snapped his instrument back to his belt. He had not used it since the hostile lights had appeared. Previously, I knew, he had been watching those lights, with the curved ray of the instrument when the lights themselves had been below the horizon.

He turned now to me. "They are here, Jac Hallen. Almost here. And I am at their mercy." His tone was ironic; then it hardened into grimness. He was addressing me, but I knew it was for Elza's benefit he spoke.

"I came here to Earth, Jac Hallen, for certain things. I find them now accomplished. I belong here no longer." He laughed. "I would not force myself into a

war prematurely. That would be very unwise. I think—we shall have to avoid this—engagement. I am—slightly outnumbered."

He called an order, quite calmly over his shoulder. I suppose, at that moment, the Earth war vessels were no more than five miles away. The whole sky was a kaleidoscope of darting lights. In answer to his order, from the peak of our tower a light bomb mounted—a vertical ray of green light. The bomb of surrender!

Tarrano chuckled. "That should halt them. Come! We must start."

He held a brief colloquy with a Venus man who appeared beside him. The man nodded and hastened back into the instrument room. The green light of our bomb had died away. The lights in the sky began fading—the whole sky fading, turning to blackness! I became aware that Tarrano had thrown around our tower a temporary isolation barrage. For a few moments—while the current he had at his command could hold it—we could not be seen on the image finders of the advancing vessels.

Tarrano repeated: "That should hold them—I have surrendered! They should be triumphant. And outside our barrage, our men will bargain with them. Ten minutes! We should be able to hold them off that long at least. Come, Lady Elza. We must start now."

With a scant ceremony in sharp contrast to his courteous words to Elza, he hurried us off. Three of us—Elza, Wolfgar and myself, with one attendant who still carried Elza's personal belongings. Hurried us into the vertical car which had brought us up into the tower. It descended now, down the iron skeleton shaft. Outside the girders I could see only the blackness of the barrage, with faint snapping sparks.

Silently we descended. It seemed very far down. And suddenly I realized that we were going lower than the ground level. The barrage sparks had vanished. The blackness now was a normal darkness; and in it I could see slipping upward the smooth black sides of the vertical shaft into which we were dropping. And the sulphuric smell of the barrage was gone. The air now smelt of earth—the heavy, close air of underground.

I do not know how far down we went. A thousand feet perhaps. The thing surprised me. Yet in those moments my mind encompassed it; and many of Tarrano's motives which I had not reasoned out before now seemed plain. He had come from Venus to the Earth, possibly several months ago. Had come directly here to Venia and set up his headquarters. His purpose on Earth—as he had just told me—did not lie with warfare. While he was here his forces had conquered the Great City of Venus, and just now, the Hill City of Mars. He controlled Venus and Mars—but he was still far from ready to attack the Earth.

He had come to the Earth in person for several important purposes. For one—he desired the Brende model and Dr. Brende's notes. He had them now; they were,

in reality, at this present moment in the Great City of Venus. Also, with the Brende secret—to control it absolutely—he had to have Georg Brende. Well, as I was soon to realize, Georg was now his captive. And the Princess Maida? His purpose in holding her was two-fold. She had, now as always in the Venus Central State, a tremendous sentimental sway upon her people. Tarrano had abducted her, forcibly to remove her from the scene of action, so that during her unexplained absence his propaganda would have more influence. He had brought her here to Earth; and now his plan was to have Georg Brende and her fall in love with each other. He still hoped to win Georg to his cause, by giving him the Princess Maida, if for no other reason. And with Maida married to Georg—and Georg in Tarrano's service—Maida herself would turn her influence in Venus to consolidate her people to Tarrano.

These, in part, were Tarrano's present plans and motives. They were working out well. And—as he had said—the Earth did not concern him now as a battleground. Later ... But even with this sudden insight which seemed to come to me, I was inadequate to grasp what later he was to attempt.

While thus occupied with my thoughts, we were steadily descending into the ground under Venia—dropping out of sight while above us, perhaps by now, the eager warcraft of Earth were overwhelming the city. Tarrano had not spoken; but when at last our little car bumped gently at the bottom, he said smilingly: "We are here, Lady Elza."

We left the car, and passed into a dim-lighted cavern. I saw a lateral black tunnel-mouth yawning nearby, with a shining rail at its top and bottom, one above the other. And between the rails was a metal vehicle. A long, narrow car; yet with its turtle-back and its propelling gas-tube at the rear, with a rudder on each side of the tube, I realized that it was designed also for sub-sea travel. A small affair. Ten feet at its greatest width, and fifty or sixty feet long.

There was nothing startling in this evidence of underground and sub-sea transportation. But that it should be here in primitive Venia surprised me. Then I realized that Tarrano had been here perhaps many months. Quietly, secretly he had constructed this underground road. For his escape, I could not doubt it. Indeed, I did not doubt but that the man had anticipated practically every event which had occurred.

We found in the car, or boat if you will, a variety of attendants and personal belongings. Tara was there; I saw her sitting alone on one of the distant rings of seats. And Argo was among us—and others whom I had learned to know by sight and name. It was the party and equipment which Tarrano had probably originally brought with him from Venus. We, the last arrivals in the car, took our places. The doors slid closed. The car vibrated slightly; purred with its forward motors. We were started.

It was not a long trip. How far we went I have no means of knowing. But after a time, by the changed motion and sounds, I realized that we were traversing water. Then above us after another interval, they opened a hatchway. The pure fresh air of night streamed in upon us. Every light in the boat had been extinguished. At Tarrano's command I followed him up the small spider incline and through the hatchway. We stood on a little circular space of the turtle-deck, well aft—an observation space enclosed by a low metal rail. A few feet below us dark glossy water was slipping past.

At a lazy hasteless pace, we were passing along what I saw to be a broad river. The Riola Amazonia[16] I afterward learned it to be. Heavy banks of luxurious foliage, dark and silent. Inundated in places. And after a few moments we slackened, turned sharply into one of the inundated coves and nosed slowly amid a tangle of the jungle bank.

[Footnote 16: Evidently the upper Amazon.]

And then I saw, hidden here in the recesses of this pathless forest, a small inter-planetary flyer, painted a hazy grey-blue. Around and over it the vegetation had been carefully, cunningly trained. A few cautious lights illumined it now; but without them, and even in daylight, I knew that from above it could never be seen.

Our party entered it—a small but surprisingly luxurious vessel. The foliage from above it was cut away by ready workmen; and in half an hour more we were rising from the forest. Straight up, into that cloudless sky. The land dropped away beneath us; visually concave at first as the circular horizon seemed to rise with us. The sky overhead fortunately was empty—nothing in sight to bar our outward flight. And we carried no lights.

In a moment or two, so swiftly did we gather velocity, the lights of Venia—a distant patch of them—were visible. Then, further away, I presently saw the grey expanse of open sea. And as we mounted, the simulated concavity of the Earth turned convex. I had never seen it thus—had never been so far above its surface before. A huge grey ball down there which was our Earth. Outlines of sea and land. Then continents and oceans, enveloped by patches of cloud area. A grey ball, changing to a glowing, vaguely dull red; then silver. Dwindling—gleaming brighter silver on one side where the sunlight struck it.

We were in the realms of outer, inter-planetary space!

CHAPTER XVI

Playground of Venus

After a trip uneventful—save that to me, taking it for the first time, it was an experience never to be forgotten in a lifetime—we landed at the Great City of Venus. We had sent no messages during the trip, and with our grey-blue color, I think we escaped telescopic and even radio observation by the Earth. Into our

vessel's small instrument room, where Tarrano spent most of his time, reports of the news occasionally drifted in. But his connection—small and inadequate—was often broken. Nor did Tarrano this time seem interested in having Wolfgar, Elza and me learn the news. Yet it was not unfavorable to him. I gathered that the Earth formally had accepted his declaration of war. Relations with Venus—and with Mars also, had been discontinued. The mails no longer left. The helios were stopped. But, so far as I could learn, the Earth was undertaking no offensive action. For the present, certainly.

Soon we were beyond reach of all messages save helios, which were not in operation. And in another day news began reaching us from Venus. But from this Tarrano barred us.

I saw Venus, as we dropped upon it, first as a tremendous lovely crescent of silver beneath us. A crescent first, and, as hours passed, the darkened area took shape. A ball hanging there in space. Growing almost momentarily larger. Soon we could distinguish cloud areas. Then the land—the water. A ball filling half our lower segment of sky. Then all of it.

We reached the Venus atmosphere, passed through cloud masses, and out again into the brilliant sunshine. Below us, glowing with the glory of mid-day, lay the Venus Central State. Rolling hills with distant mountain peaks, the highest of them far-away, glittering white with the sunlight on their snow-caps.

A land of warmth and beauty. Dazzling green, with a luxuriant vegetation, tropical yet strange.

As we dropped lower, I sat alone, gazing downward. We were passing over the land now, at an altitude of no more than twenty thousand feet. A vivid land. Vivid sunlight; inky shadows; a green to everything—a solid, brilliant green. Amid it, spots of other colors; splashes of yellow; patches of scarlet as though some huge field were massed with scarlet blossoms. And trailing silver threads—rivers and streams. Or again glittering silver lakes nestling in the hills.

A fairyland of beauty. Yet as I gazed, it seemed not the fairyland of a child. Not childish, but mature; for I could not miss in its aspect, a warmth, a quality of sensuousness. A land of dalliance and pleasure of the senses. And I realized then why the Venus people derived all their advancement of science and industry from Earthly and Martian sources. A hand of luxury and physical ease. People, not primitive—but decadent.

I became aware of Wolfgar at my elbow. "It is very beautiful, eh, Jac Hallen?"

"Beautiful—yes. You've been here before, Wolfgar?"

He nodded. "Oh yes. Soon we will reach the Great City. That too is strange and beautiful."

Elza saw us together and joined us. The Great City presently came into distant view. Wolfgar, with that gentle voice and smile characteristic of him began to de-

scribe to us what we should see. Abruptly Elza said:

"I have never really thanked you, Wolfgar. You saved my life—there when Tara attacked me."

He gestured. "Your thanks are more than such a service deserves."

As though the subject had suggested Georg and Maida to him, he added, "I am wondering where Georg Brende and the Princess Maida may be."

I fancied then that I saw a quality of wistfulness in his eyes. A gentle little fellow, this Mars man. Queer and brooding, with strange thoughts not to be fathomed. He added as though to himself: "I have often wondered—" Then stopped.

Elza and I had discussed it. We felt sure that Georg and Maida had been taken to Venus. They could have had only a few hours' start of ourselves. Yet this vessel we were in was unusually slow. We felt convinced that they had already arrived on Venus—had been there perhaps already for a day.

We discussed it now with Wolfgar as the Great City came under us; but soon we fell silent, gazing down into this beautiful capital of the Central State.

It lay in a broad hollow, a large, irregular circular bowl surrounded by gently sloping hillsides. The bowl was entirely filled by water—a broad flat lake of silver which from this height showed us its pearly bottom. On the water—seen from above—the houses seemed floating—clusters of lily pads on a placid shining pool. They were, in reality, flat cubical buildings solidly built of rectangular blocks of stone, standing just above the water level on solid stone foundations. Always green and white—stones like blocks of smooth, polished marble, set in green and white patterns. Balconies and cornices of what might have been gleaming, beaten copper. Flat roofs, edged with scarlet flowers.

Some of the buildings were low and small. Others of several stories, pretentious and ornate. One very large, like a palace, standing alone on its verdant island.

The houses were mostly gathered in clusters of various shapes and sizes. Yet a semblance of order prevailed. Winding streets of open water lay between the groups. There were trellised walks and arching spider bridges, sometimes over the streets, sometimes joining one house to another.

Here and there I saw lagoons of open water, dotted with small green islands like parks—islands on which the vegetation grew far higher and more luxuriant than any even in the tropics of our Earth. Vegetation always under careful training and control. Profuse with flowers, vivid and gigantic. The houses too, were roofed with gardens—sometimes with pergolas and trellises of the aerial scarlet blossoms. Occasionally—these latter details I observed as we descended close upon the city—I saw houses with a tiny swimming pool on the roof—a private pool hidden in masses of colored flowers.

A playground—the playground of Venus. It seemed very backward—uncivi-

lized. And then Wolfgar pointed out the surrounding hillsides. On them, cleared of their vegetation, our modern civilization stood gaunt and efficient. Towers, aerials, landing stages, aerial trams, factories, tall stacks over the dynamo houses belching thick black smoke, which artificial wind-generators carefully blew away from the city.

In the midst of their hillside ring of necessary modernity, the people of the Great City had kept their playground inviolate. Work, science, industry—all necessary. But the real business of life was pleasure. Art, music, beauty.... And I am not far from thinking that unless abused, their formula is better than ours.

CHAPTER XVII

Violet Beam of Death

We landed on a stage at the summit of one of the nearer hillsides. Our coming—unheralded since we had carried no sending instruments—created a furor. The workers rested to watch us as we disembarked. It was not so different a scene, here on the hill, than might have occurred on Earth. We took a moving platform, down the hill, to the water's edge. A barge was awaiting us—a broad flat vessel with gaudy trappings. A score of attendants lined its sides, each with a pole to thrust it through the shallow water. And on its high-raised stern, beneath a canopy was a couch upon which Tarrano reclined, with us of his party at his feet.

A royal barge, queerly ancient, barbaric—reminding me of the flat, motionless pictures of Earth's early history. Yet it was a symbol here on Venus, not of barbarism, but of decadence.

We started off. I may have given a false idea of the size of the Great City. Its lake, indeed, was fully fifteen miles or more in diameter. Half a million people lived on or close around that placid stretch of water.

The news of Tarrano's arrival had instantly spread. Graceful boats, all propelled by hand, thronged our course. From them, and from every house-window, balcony and roof-top, a waving multitude cheered the coming of the Master. The new Master, to whom so recently they had given their allegiance—the Master who in return was to endow them with life everlasting.

It was a gay, holiday throng—cheering us, tossing flower-petals down upon us as we passed majestically beneath the bridges. Yet among these gaudily dressed women and men with the luster of wealth and ease upon them, others mingled. Others of a lower class, poorly dressed, with the badge of servitude upon them, enthralled in a social peonage which I did not yet understand.

"Slaans," Wolfgar called them. A term half of derision, half contempt. And Wolfgar pointed one out to me. A huge grey, surly-looking fellow passing in a one-man shell or boat of tree-fibre. He gazed up at us as he went by—a furtive glance of cold, sullen fury. Unmistakable. And I saw it again on others of his kind—

men, women, even children who gazed at us with big, round eyes. A dumb, sullen resentment, with a smouldering fury beneath it.

During the trip, which may have taken an hour, I remarked something also, which did not at the time seem significant but very soon I was to recall it and understand its import. Argo, of course, was still with us. As we embarked upon the barge, a man evidently an official of the Great City had paid his humble respects to Tarrano and then withdrawn to a further part of the vessel, drawing Argo with him. I saw the two in close conversation. The official evidently was telling Argo something of importance. I could see Argo growing indignant and then his eyes gleaming, a leer upon his cruel lips.

During the trip Tarrano sat calm, half reclining on his couch—sat watching with his keen expressionless eyes the applause of the multitude. It was, I think, and I believe he felt it also, the height of his career up to that time—this triumphant entry into the greatest city of Venus. He did not speak, just sat watching and listening, with a half smile of triumph pulling at his mouth. Yet I know too, that those keen eyes of his did not miss the sullen glances of the slaans.

The weather, as always in the Venus Central State, was warm—a luxurious tropic warmth. And now I felt—as I had seen from above—the languorous, sensuous quality of it all. Music, mingled with the ripple of girlish laughter and cheers, came from the houses as we passed. Soft, fragrant flower-petals deluged us. The very air was laden heavy with exotic perfumes from the flowers which were everywhere.

We arrived at last at what appeared to be a palace—a broad, low building of polished stone, on an island of its own. It was the building I had noticed when first we saw the Great City from above. Gardens were about the building, and on its roof. Flowers lined its many balconies.

We drew up to a stone landing-place.

"The palace of the Princess Maida," Wolfgar whispered.

But I had no time to question him. Attendants appeared. A queer mixture. Incongruous men of science, armed with belts of instruments. They greeted Tarrano humbly; escorted him away.

Other attendants. Natives of the city, in the flowing, bright-colored robes we had seen everywhere. A group of them—laughing young girls—descended upon us.

"The Princess Maida bids you welcome."

They hurried us into the building. I was surprised. Tarrano had seemingly ignored us. It was quite as though we were honored guests, arriving in the Central State when Maida was its ruler.

Led by the girls, we passed upward into the building past splashing fountains, cascades of perfumed water with tubes of silver light gleaming in its midst; and

were thrust at last into a room.

The girls withdrew. Across the floor-polished stone, with heavy woven rugs upon it—Georg and the Princess Maida advanced upon us.

Our greetings were brief. I could have talked to them both for a day, questioning them; and they, no doubt, had as much to ask of us. But they were solemn, grave and anxious.

"Not now, Jac," Georg said to check me. "Elza dear—I have been so worried over you."

"But——" I demanded.

"Jac—the situation here—our own cause—the safety of our Earth itself—this Tarrano—"

But Maida stopped him. "The very air has ears. Not now." Her glance turned to Wolfgar; her slim hands went out to greet him. "Wolfgar, my friend. It is good to see you here."

Wolfgar knelt before her, gazed for one instant into her eyes, and then with head bowed, brushed the hem of her robe to his face.

She laughed gently. "Stand up, Wolfgar. I would not be the Princess Maida to you now. Only—your friend. Your grateful friend."

There was a sudden soundless flash. From across the room a beam of violet flame darted at us. It struck just between Maida and Wolfgar, as he rose from his knee. Both of them involuntarily stepped backward, apart from each other. And between them, breast high, the flame hung level across the room. Maida was on one side of it; all the rest of us, on the other.

I turned. At the door, Argo had appeared. From a black object in his hand, the beam was streaming. He rested the black thing on a wall ledge so that the beam hung level.

"Stand where you are, all of you." He started toward Maida, behind the beam from the rest of us.

Georg made as though to leap forward, but Wolfgar restrained him. "Wait! You don't understand—that's death!"

I saw now that the violet light had encircled us. Only Maida and Argo were outside it. He was approaching her, with a cylinder in his hand. The ray from it struck her without power of movement or speech. Her eyes, terrified, turned to us. Again Georg would have leaped, but Wolfgar shouted, "Wait! That's death! Don't you understand?"

Argo was leering. "Death? Yes! If you touch that violet light! Death, of course. But you won't touch it! You will stand and watch—stand silently for you know that if you shout, the vibrations will bring the beam upon you. You won't move—you'll stand and watch me kill your Princess Maida—not quickly—she is too beautiful

for that. You, Georg Brende—you, Wolfgar, traitor from Mars. You shall see your Princess Maida die—this would-be traitoress to my Master Tarrano!''

With all the strength of his puny body Wolfgar flung Georg backward—safely away from the deadly violet beam. And then, without warning, without a cry which would endanger us, the little Mars man sprang headlong, into and through the violet beam of death.

CHAPTER XVIII

Passing of a Friend

Wolfgar was not dead; but when we picked him up it was obvious that he was dying. The violet beam vanished as his body struck it—vanished with a hiss and splutter, and a puff of sulphuric smoke that mingled with the smell of burning garments and flesh.

Georg and I leaped forward. Argo was standing transfixed by surprise at what Wolfgar had done; and as the beam died, Georg was upon him.

''One moment!''

The quiet, commanding voice of Tarrano. He must have come quickly, when informed by the finders of Argo's treachery. Yet he stood now at the arcade entrance, drawn to his full height, frowning with lowered brows, but wholly without appearance of haste.

''One moment—stand aside, all of you.''

Argo cowered. The rest of us moved aside. Elza came toward me, and I put my arm around her. Poor little Elza! She was shivering with fright.

Tarrano seemed not to need information as to what had transpired. His eyes, roving over us, saw the lifeless, seared body of Wolfgar lying on the floor.

''Too bad,'' he said. Then his gaze swung to Argo.

''Master——''

''Silence!''

There was on Tarrano's face and in his voice an expression, a tone quite new to me. A quiet grimness. More than that. A quality of deadliness—of inexorable deadliness which could well have chilled the stoutest heart that fronted it.

''Come here, Argo.'' Tarrano stood quite motionless. ''Argo!''

''Master! Master, you——''

''Come!''

Argo was on the floor. Shaking with terror—for he, probably better than any of us, understood what was coming—dragged himself to Tarrano's feet.

''Stand up!''

''Master, have mercy——''

"Stand up! Are you a man?"

Argo's legs would barely support him, but he struggled to get himself erect. With a wrench, Tarrano tore the robe from Argo's chest.

"Master! Master! Have mercy!"

In Tarrano's hand I saw a needle-like piece of steel. A dagger, yet it was more like a needle.

"Master—Oh——"

Tarrano had stabbed it gently into the man's chest. A mere prick into the flesh, and a tiny drop of blood oozed out.

For a moment Argo stood swaying. Eyes white-rimmed with mortal terror as he stupidly looked down at the drop of blood. A moment, then the injected poison took effect. He tottered, flung his arms above his head and fell. Lay writhing an instant; then twitching; and then quite still.

Tarrano turned away, his face impassive. "Unfortunate. He was a good man in many ways—I shall be sorry to lose his services." He saw me with my arm around Elza, and he frowned.

"So?"

Instinctively, involuntarily—and I hated myself for it—I dropped my arm.

Georg exclaimed: "Wolfgar—he——"

Tarrano turned from me. "He is not dead—but he will die. There is nothing we can do. I'm very sorry—very sorry indeed."

A sincere regret was in his tone. We lifted Wolfgar up, carried him to a depression in the floor by the wall—a shallow, couch-like bowl half-filled with down.

On the floor we gathered, seated on cushions; and presently Wolfgar regained consciousness. His face was not burned. It lighted with a dazed smile; and his eyes, searching us, picked out Maida.

"You are safe—I'm—so glad."

His voice was low and labored; and at once his eyes closed again as though the effort of speaking were too great.

Maida was sitting near me at Wolfgar's head, bending over him. She had recovered from her terror of Argo; and as she leaned down, gazing at the dying Wolfgar, I think I have never seen so gentle, so compassionate an expression upon the face of any woman.

Elza whispered: "There must be something we can do. The men of medicine—the lights—the healing lights! Georg! Cannot you use father's——"

They were only an overwrought girl's excited ideas, of course. Wolfgar's lungs were seared; even as Elza spoke, he coughed, and blood welled from his mouth—blood which Georg quickly wiped away.

Tarrano was on his feet behind us, with folded arms; and as he looked down, I saw on his face also—the face which a few moments before had been grim with deadly menace—a look now of gentle compassion very much like Maida's.

"No use," he said softly. "We can do nothing. He will die."

Again Wolfgar's eyes opened. "Die—of course." He tried to raise one of his burned hands, but dropped it back. "Die? Yes—of course. In just a moment...." His eyes, already dulled, swung about. "Who is that—crying? There's no need—to cry."

It was little Elza beside me, struggling to suppress her sobs.

Wolfgar's slow, labored voice demanded: "That isn't—my Princess Maida crying—is it? I don't want—her to cry——"

"No," said Georg gently. "Maida is here—right here by you. She isn't crying."

His gaze found Maida's face. "Oh, yes—I can see you—Princess Maida. You're not crying—that's good. There's nothing to—cry about."

He seemed for a moment to gather a little strength; he moved his head and saw Tarrano standing there behind us.

"Master?" He used the old term with a whimsical smile. "I—called you that—for a long time, didn't I? You have a right to consider me a traitor——"

"A spy," said Tarrano very gently. "Not a traitor. That you would have been had you served me—a traitor to your Princess."

Wolfgar's head tried to nod; relief was on his face. "I'm—glad you understand. I would not want to die—having you think harshly of me——"

"You are a man—I honor you." Abruptly Tarrano turned away and strode across the room. And always since I have wondered if he left that scene of death because of the emotion he could not hide.

Georg said: "You should not talk, Wolfgar."

"But I—want to talk. I have—only a few minutes. Just these—last few minutes—I want to talk to my—Princess Maida. You'll—excuse us—the Princess Maida and me—won't you? Just for these last—few minutes?"

We withdrew beyond his fading sight.

"My—Princess Maida——"

His voice still reached us. She leaned closer over him. Her tears were falling now, but as she spoke she strove for calmness.

"Wolfgar——"

His eyes were glazing, but they dung to her. "Princess——"

"No," she said. "Just Maida—your friend. The woman you have given your life for." Her voice almost broke. "Oh, Wolfgar! Never shall I forget that. To give your life——"

"It is—a great honor." The gesture he made to check her words of thanks exhausted him. His eyes closed; for a moment he seemed not to breathe. As Maida leaned down in alarm, her beautiful white hair tumbled forward over her shoulders. A lock of it brushed Wolfgar. He could not lift his hands, but they groped for the tresses, found them and clung. Her white waves of hair, with his fingers, shriveled, burned black, entwined in them.

Again his eyelids came up. "You won't leave me—Princess Maida. Not for these—last few minutes?"

"No," she half whispered.

"You—cannot—if you would." His whimsical smile returned. "You see? I am—holding you."

For a moment he was silent. His eyes stayed open, staring dully at her. His face and lips were drained now of their blood.

"You're—still there?"

"Yes, Wolfgar."

"Yes—of course I know you are. But I—cannot see you very well—now. You look—so far away."

She put her face down quite close to him. Her eyes were brimming with tears.

"Oh—yes," he said. "That's better—much better. Now I can—see you—very plainly. I was thinking—I wanted to—tell you something. It—wouldn't be right to tell you—except that I'll soon—be gone where it won't make any difference."

He gathered all his last remaining strength. "I—love you—Princess Maida."

She forced a gentle smile through her tears. "Yes, Wolfgar."

"I mean," he persisted, "not as my Princess—just as—a woman. The—woman I've always loved. That's been my secret. You see? It would—always have been—my secret—the little Mars man Wolfgar—in love with his Princess Maida. You—don't think it too impertinent of me—do you? I mean—confessing it now—just at—the end?"

"No," she whispered. "No, Wolfgar."

"Thank you—very much." His breath exhaled with a faint sigh. "Thank you—very much. I wanted to tell you that—before I—go. And—if you wouldn't mind—I want to—call you—just Maida."

"Just Maida, Wolfgar. Yes, of course, I want you to call me that." Her voice was broken. She brushed away her tears that he might not notice them.

"Yes," he agreed. His staring eyes were trying to see her. "My Maida. You're—very beautiful—my Maida. I—wonder—you see, I'm taking advantage of you—I wonder if you'd say you—love me? I'd be so happy—just to hear you say it."

As I sat there behind them, I prayed then that she might say it.

"I love you, Wolfgar."

"Oh," he whispered. "You did say it! My Maida says that she loves me!" Happiness transfigured his livid face. But his smile was whimsical still. "You're—very kind to me. Please—say it again."

"I love you, Wolfgar."

"Yes—that's how I always dreamed it would sound. I—love—you—Wolfgar."

His voice trailed away; a film was settling over his staring eyes. Then again his lips moved. "Maida says—'I love you, Wolfgar' ... I'm—so happy...."

Quite suddenly she realized that he was gone. Her pent-up emotion came with a sob.

"Wolfgar! My friend—my wonderful, loyal friend—don't die, Wolfgar! Don't die!"

CHAPTER XIX

Waters of Eternal Peace

Little Wolfgar was gone. It seemed at first very strange, unreal. It lay a shadow of grief upon our spirits, for many hours a deeper shadow than all those grave events impending upon which hung the fate of three worlds.

Tarrano ordered for Wolfgar a public burial of ceremony and honor in the waters of eternal peace—ordered it for that same evening. Once again Tarrano demonstrated the strangeness of his nature. His arrival to take possession of Venus had been made the occasion of a great festival. "The Water Festival," they called it, which was held only at times of universal public rejoicing. It was planned now to do honor to Tarrano—planned for this same evening. But he postponed it a night; tonight was for Wolfgar.

We were still captives in Tarrano's hands, as we had been on Earth in Venia. Yet here in the Great City of Venus a curious situation arose. Tarrano himself explained it to us that afternoon. An embarrassing situation for him, he termed it.

"Very embarrassing," he said, with eyes that smiled at us quizzically. "Just for your ears alone, you understand, I am willing to admit that I must handle these Great City people very carefully. You, Princess Maida—you are greatly beloved of your people."

"Yes," she said.

He nodded. "For that reason they would not like to know you are virtually a captive. And you, Georg Brende—really, they are beginning to look on you as a savior—to save them from disease and death. It is rather unflattering to me——"

He broke off, then with sudden decision added:

"Soon you two will realize that to join me will be your best course. And best for all the worlds, for it will bring to them all peace and health and happiness.... No, I ask no decision from you now. Nor from you, Lady Elza." His gaze softened

as he regarded her—softened almost to a quantity of wistfulness. "You know, Lady Elza, for what I am striving. I may—indeed I shall—conquer the worlds. But you hold in the palm of your little white hand, my real reward.... Enough!"

And then he offered us a sort of pseudo-liberty. We might all come and go about the Great City at will. Apparently—to the public eye—allied to Tarrano. The Princess Maida—as before—hereditary honored ruler; with Tarrano guiding the business affairs of State, as on Earth our Presidents and their Councils rule the legendary Kings and Queens. The one ruling in fact; the other, an affair of pretty sentiment.

It was this condition which Tarrano now desired to bring about. With Georg already beloved for his medical knowledge; and flying rumors (started no doubt by Tarrano) that the handsome Earth man would some day marry their Princess.

Myself—the irony of it!—I was appointed a sort of bodyguard to the Lady Elza—the little Earth girl whose presence in the Great City would help conciliate the Earth and bring about universal peace—with Venus in control.

So ran the popular fancy, guided by Tarrano. We were given our pseudo-liberty, watched always by the unseen eyes of Tarrano's guards. And there was nothing we could do but accept our status. Tarrano was guiding his destiny cleverly. Yet underneath it all, unseen forces were at work. We sensed them. The slaans—submissive at their menial tasks, but everywhere with sullen, resentful glances. Perhaps Tarrano realized his danger; but I do not think that he, any more than the rest of us, realized what the Water Festival was to bring forth.

That night—our first night on Venus—midway between the darkness of sunset and the dawn—we buried Wolfgar. The air was soft and warm, with a gentle breeze that riffled the placid waters of the lake. Overhead, the sky gleamed with a myriad stars—reddish stars, all of them like Red Mars himself as seen through the heavy Venus atmosphere. Largest of them, the Earth. My birthplace! Save Elza here with me on Venus, that tiny red spot in the heavens, red like the tip of a lighted arrant-cylinder, held all that was dear to me!

The funeral cortege—a solemn line of panoplied boats, started from the palace. Boats hung with purple fabric. In single file they wended their way through the city streets. From every landing, balcony, window and roof-top, the people stared down at us. The street corners were hung with shaded tubes of light, shining down with spots of color to the water.

As we passed, the people bowed their heads, hands to their foreheads, palms outward. The gesture of grief. From one building came a low musical chant.

"Honor to Wolfgar! The man who gave his life for our Princess. Honor to Wolfgar!"

We came to the edge of the city. The lake here narrowed to a river—a length of winding river opening to the pond which was the burial place of Eternal Peace.

On Tarrano's barge, with Elza and Georg, we led the way. Maida was not with us. I asked Tarrano where she was, but solemnly he denied me.

At the burial waters—on the sloping banks of which a silent throng had gathered—we landed. And following us, the other vessels of the cortege came along and stopped beside us. The pond was dotted with white markers for the graves. The whole scene unlighted, save for the stars, and the red and purple aural lights of the Venus heavens, which mounted the sky at this midnight hour. A great, glowing arc—the reflected glow from a myriad cluster of tiny moons and moon-dust, encircling Venus. The soft light from it flooded the water and the tombs with a flush of red and purple.

As we lay there against the bank, with that silent throng breathlessly watching, from down the river came the last vessel of our cortege. It made a scene I shall never forget. The bier. Draped in purple. A single, half-naked slaan propelling it with a sweep from its stern. The body of Wolfgar lying on its raised prow—his dead, white face, with peace upon it. Beside the body, the lone figure of Maida, kneeling at Wolfgar's head, with her white, braided hair falling down over her shoulders. Kneeling and staring, almost expressionless; but I knew that with her whole heart she was speeding the soul of Wolfgar to its eternal peace.

CHAPTER XX

Unseen Menace

That day following the burial of Wolfgar, there was nothing of importance occurred. No news from the Earth could get in. I felt that the Earth might be planning an attack. Probably was, since war had been declared. Yet that of course was months away.

Tarrano apparently was engaged in the pleasurable triumph of the coming Water Festival. All day he seemed engaged in planning it. But I knew that he was engaged secretly with far sterner things concerning the Cold Country, which lay a day's journey from us. But what they were, I did not know.

The Water Festival was all we talked of. That afternoon, Tarrano describing it, said smilingly:

"They say it is for me. But, Lady Elza—it is I who plan it—for you. You have not seen the Red Woman." A gleam of amusement played upon his lips; but as he regarded Elza, I saw another look—of speculation, as though he were gauging her.

"The Red Woman, Lady Elza. She will preside tonight. You will find her—very interesting. We will watch her together, you and I."

I did not know then what he meant; but I remembered the words later, and understood only too well.

Just after sundown, when I chanced to be in a small boat alone, near the palace, the first of two significant incidents occurred. From the shadows beneath a house, the head of a swimming man emerged. A slaan, and he gripped the sides of my boat as I drifted.

"Wait, Earth man." He spoke in the quaint universal language, which I understood, though imperfectly.

I gazed at him. A bullet-like head, with sullen, blazing eyes. He added: "We do not blame you—or your woman, Elza—or the Princess Maida. Have no fear, but guard yourself well tonight."

Before I could speak he had sunk into the water, swimming beneath it. I could see the phosphorescence of his moving body as he swam away into the shadows beyond my line of vision.

The other incident came a moment later. As I was gazing down into the water I saw a moving metal shape. A triangular metal head, as of a diver's cap. More than that, it turned upward; and behind its pane was a man's face. Unfamiliar to me—yet the face of an Anglo-Saxon man of Earth! Unmistakable! It stared at me a moment—no more than three or four feet below my boat. And then it moved away and vanished.

I had no opportunity to speak alone with Elza, or Georg or Maida that entire evening. Always Tarrano was with us. We sat upon the palace balcony, we men smoking our arrant-cylinders. Tarrano talked and joked like a care-free youth. He was very courteous to Elza, with a holiday spirit upon him. But his eyes never relaxed; and often I could see him measuring her.

The aural lights mounted the sky. The holiday spirit which was on Tarrano was spreading everywhere throughout the city. Boats gayly bedecked—in such contrast to the funeral cortege of poor Wolfgar just the night before—began passing the palace on their way to the festival waters. Men and laughing girls thronged them. All with red masks covering their faces. The men in grey tight-fitting garments, with conical caps and flowing plumes; the girls in bright-colored, flowing robes, and tresses dangling with flowers entwined in them.

The balcony upon which we sat was close above the water level. The barges, of every size and kind, glided past. Sometimes the girls would shower us with flower petals. One small boat paused before us. A girl stood up to wave at me. Her hand, held up with the loose robe falling back from her slim white arm, offered me a huge scarlet blossom. The love offering. As I hesitated, her laughter rippled out. She tore the mask from her face. Her red mouth was smiling; her eyes, provocative, were dancing with mischief. She tossed the flower into my face as her escort, with a shout of mock anger, pulled her back to him.

Their boats glided on.

Other boats passed; some with girls gayly strumming instruments of music.

One boat with a man strumming, and a girl on a small dais, dancing with a whirl of black veils. As they came opposite to us another man in the boat reached up and pushed the girl overboard. She fell into the water with a scream of laughter; came up like a mermaid and they pulled her aboard, the veils and her hair clinging to her.

At last Tarrano signified that we must go. It was upon me then to make an effort to draw back, to keep Elza and Maida at the palace with Georg and me. My heart was heavy with foreboding. Amid all this laughter and music—pleasure of the senses reigning supreme here in the Great City tonight—I could not miss a sense of impending evil. The slaans propelling the boats were stolid and grim. Not for them, this dalliance. Not for their women, this music and laughter, these daring costumes to display their beauty. The slaan women, drab with work, were slinking about unnoticed. Often I would see a boat of them slip by, furtively, in the shadows. Drab women, watching these beauties, resentful, sullen—and with what purpose smouldering in their hearts I could only guess.

The very air—to me at least—seemed pregnant with impending evil. I know that Georg felt it too. Often I had caught his eye as he regarded me. Once he started to whisper to me aside, but like a flash, Tarrano with his microphonic ear, turned to interrupt us.

I wanted to stay with Elza at the palace. Suddenly I was afraid of Tarrano, more afraid for Elza than I had ever been. And who, and what was this Red Woman? Maida knew, of course. Maida had been very solemn for hours; thoughtful, almost grim.

And the slaan in the water who said he did not blame us. He had warned us to guard ourselves. But how? There were no weapons. On this night of pleasure nothing would have been more incongruous.

And that metal cap in the water with a man's face behind it? An Earth man of my own race! What did it mean?

I was perturbed—frightened. But I did not demur when Tarrano led us to his flower-bedecked barge. Of what use?

We were paired. Georg with Maida; Elza with Tarrano. And I? Tarrano told me curtly—and with a smile of ironic amusement—that when we reached the festival so handsome a man as I would have no trouble engaging the attention of some Venus maiden.

On cushions in the barge we reclined while our slaans poled us along the streets. Tarrano was feeding sweets to Elza as though they were gay young lovers. Poor little Elza! She was frightened. Her face was a trifle pale, her lips set. But she, too, knew that we were wholly in Tarrano's power, and she made the best of the situation. Sometimes she would laugh gayly; but I could not miss the note of fear in it.

The progress of our barge was slow. Boats clustered around us, their occupants pelting us with flowers. A deluge spray of perfume was turned on us—a heavy, exotic scent, almost cloying. It lay redolent on our garments for hours.

Presently Tarrano gave us masks. And long robes for Maida and Elza to cover the gay holiday dresses they were wearing.

At the edge of the city a canal had been dug through the hillside. We passed slowly through it, under archways of dangling colored lights, around a sharp bend and came upon the Water Festival. And—with impending tragedy for the moment forgotten—I gazed for this first time at such a scene of pleasure and beauty as I had never even imagined.

CHAPTER XXI

Love, Music—and a Warning

The Water Festival! As our barge rounded a bend in the canal, under the archways of dangling colored lights, the festival spread before us. Involuntarily I stood up to gaze. The canal opened into an artificial lake—a broad circular sheet of water some 800 helans[17] in diameter. Sloping hillsides enclosed the lake—hillsides which I saw were terraced with huge banks of seats in tiers one above the other.

[Footnote 17: About 4,000 feet.]

The seats were crowded with people. White ribbons of roads gave access from the neighboring countryside for land-surface vehicles, and there were stages for the accommodation of air-craft. The rural populace, and people from the nearby smaller cities, had gathered to view this national spectacle—a million or more of them probably, with their individual electrical telescopes for direct distant vision, and small pocket mirrors for that which otherwise would be hidden. A million people at least, seated here on these gigantic spreading tiers.

The lake itself was thus the stage as it were, of a tremendous arena. Tiny artificial islands dotted the lake—a hundred of them. Islands, some no more than a few feet broad; some larger, and in the center of the lake, one quite large. All the islands were covered with luxuriant vegetation. The tiny ones were no more than shadowed nooks of leaves and flowers.

Between the islands, crooked lanes of the placid water wended their way in and out, broadening into occasional lagoons. Bridges crossed the lanes; archways of lights spanned them at intervals.

From this distance the whole scene was a riot of color and great red and purple auroral lights of Venus, which at this midnight hour rode the upper sky, tinged everything vividly. The archway lights were soft rose, silver and gold. Some of the tiny islands, from sources hidden were bathed in bright silver. Others darker, in deep purple and red; still others, quite unlighted, dim and shadowed, touched

only by the reflected glow from those near them.

From the main island lights were flashing into the sky; occasional color bombs mounted and burst, painting the heavens.

A riot of color. And then as we approached, I became aware of sound and movement as well. Music from scores of unseen sources. Music from single isolated instruments floating softly over the water—lovers playing accompaniment to their pleading voices; or again, groups of voices—the curiously mellow voices of young girls—and, on an island apart, music from an aerial carrying strains from the public concelan.[18]

[Footnote 18: Orchestra.]

It was all music of a type unfamiliar to me of Earth. The intellectuality of our Earth music was missing. This music of Venus was built upon queer minor strains; unfinished cadences; a rhythm of the sort we of Earth could never encompass. I listened, and felt the appeal of my senses. The lavish, abandoned music of barbarism? I had almost thought it that. Yet it was not. Rather was it decadent. This whole scene; the color, the music, the heavy cloying scents with which the night air was redolent; the warm, sensuous abandonment, felt rather than made obvious—it was not barbarism, but decadence. And I realized then how close are the two extremes. A reversion to type, merely. And I knew, then, that from the pinnacle of civilization which we of Earth had reached, naught lay before us but this.

Music everywhere throughout the festival. And movement. As we floated out of the canal, passing slowly along one of the broader waterways, boats and barges slipped past us. Barges crowded with revelers. And the small boats, generally with but a man and a girl—fugitive couples with the holiday spirit upon them, seeking the shadowed nooks of islands for their love-making.

In one lagoon we came upon such a boat. The man in it—a gay youth in red and black motley, with the mask fallen from his laughing, perspiring face—was in its stern, manipulating it with a long, thin paddle. The girl was lying face down on cushions in its prow. She was facing forward, with her long white hair tumbling about her. Around the boat were clustered a number of other boats. Each was small, with only a man in it. A ring of boats, besieging the girl. Our barge paused to watch. A boat would dash forward, its occupant standing up to thrust it on. But the girl, swung to meet it by the efforts of her escort, would turn her cylinder of alcholite[19] upon the attacker. Befuddled, her adversary would retreat; or another, momentarily drunk, would fall into the water to be sobered.

[Footnote 19: A scent or perfume, highly intoxicating.]

All with gay shouts of laughter; until at last the couple were victorious and scurried away to their island.

We passed on. There were mimic battles often on the islands. A hidden couple found out and dragged back. A lone man attacked and pelted with flowers by a

band of marauding girls. A diving platform at one end of an oval lagoon. Girls mounting it to dive into the red-shimmering water, where waiting youths were swimming, and by their prowess in downing other contenders would seize upon the girls and carry them off to where a barge was loading its passengers for the main island.

To this main island we came at last. It was heavily wooded, and indented with shallow, placid waterways. In one of them we landed; and amid a sudden quiet and awe at the presence of Tarrano, we went ashore. Georg walking with Maida; Tarrano forcing Elza to hold his arm; and I, beside Elza until Tarrano sternly bade me walk behind.

We were masked, but the revelers knew us. Amid the throng with which the island was packed, we moved slowly forward toward a gay pavilion which was in the center of the grove. Music came from it—a broad, roofed-over pavilion with a dancing floor in the depression of its center space, and tiers of balconies above it.

Within the pavilion, where the air was heavy with the smell of wine, arrant-smoke, intoxicating whiffs of surreptitiously used alcholite-cylinders and sensuous perfumes upon the garments of the women—in here, the throng pressed around us; the dancers stopped to gaze; the music momentarily hushed; the spectators on the balconies—girls reclining on cushions with young gallants seated beside them with trays of food and drink—all turned to crane down at us.

"Honor to the Master Tarrano!"

A girl shouted it. A murmur of applause swept about us.

Abruptly Tarrano removed his mask. His face, which had been concealed, showed with the flush of pleasure and his lips were parted with a smile of gratification and triumph. But, as the red silk mask was doffed, another took its place—the mask of imperturbability—that grave, inscrutable look with which he always masked his real emotions.

"Honor to the Master Tarrano!"

Tarrano raised his hand; his quiet, calm voice carried throughout the silent room.

"There is no Master here tonight. No Master—only the Mistress of Love. Let us honor her. Let her rule us all—tonight."

For just an instant his gaze seemed to linger upon Elza; then he gravely replaced his red mask. Applause swept the room; the music started again. The lights overhead began whirling their kaleidoscope of colors down upon the dancers.

We took our places in a canopied enclosure upon the first balcony, some twenty feet above the dance floor. Tarrano refused the cushions; he placed Elza deferentially upon them, and spread food and drink and sweet-meats before her. Near them sat Georg and Maida. I would have sat between Elza and Georg, but Tarrano pulled me away from them.

"You are wanted below." He said it very softly, for my ears alone; but through his mask I could see his eyes blazing at me.

"They are diving into the pool outside—cannot you hear them, Jac Hallen?" Impatience came to his voice; in truth, I must have been staring at him witless. "Maidens out there, Jac Hallen, who are seeking handsome youths like yourself for escort. Must I speak plainly? You are not wanted here. Go!"

"I——"

"Another word will be your last." His voice was still almost emotionless, but I did not miss the gesture of his hand to his belt. "You had best obey, Jac Hallen."

I was hardly so witless as not to realize the truth of his admonition. I turned away; and with all the laughter and movement around us, I think that Georg, Maida and Elza did not see me go.

For the space of an hour or more, I stood alone on the lower floor of the pavilion, watching the balcony where Tarrano and the others sat. Stood there alone, feeling helpless and with my heart heavy with foreboding. Beneath my grey robe I was dressed in holiday fashion of the Great City—beribboned and gartered, with feathers at my scarlet shoulders for all the world like a male nada.[20] My red mask I kept on, and folded my cloak around me.

[Footnote 20: A popinjay—fop.]

The dance floor was crowded. I saw now that it was cut into small circles marked with black—circles in diameter about the length of a man. At intervals—perhaps five minutes apart—a signal in the music caused each of the dancing couples to select a circle and to dance wholly within it. And then one of the circles, by mechanical device, was raised into the air above all the others. The couple on it, thus prominent, danced at their best, to be judged by Tarrano for a prize.

For an hour I stood there. I could see Elza plainly. She had removed her mask. Her face was flushed, her lips laughing. Once, in a chance silence, her shout of applause rang out. The quality of abandonment in it turned me cold. Did I see Tarrano's hand move back to his belt? Was he intoxicating her? Then I saw Maida make a gesture—wave something from beneath her cloak at Elza. A scent to sober her? It seemed so, for Elza looked confused; and I saw Maida flash her a look of warning.

Abruptly, from an alcove near me, a group of girls rushed out. Their cloaks and white veils fell from them as they came my way—laughing as they ran for the doorway leading outside to the pool. I was in their way and they bumped into me; one of them gripped me. I tried to jerk loose, but she clung. A slim girl, enveloped in her long, white tresses. Her eyes laughed at me; her red mouth went up alluringly to my face.

"I love you—you, Jac Hallen." Her arms wound about my neck as she clung. I was trying to cast her off when her fingers lifted a corner of my mask.

"I was afraid you were not Jac Hallen." Her whisper was relieved, and it had suddenly turned swift and vehement. "I am sister to Maida—my name, Alda. I am to warn you. When Tarrano dances with the Red Woman—when they go up on the raised circle—you drop to the floor! You understand? Keep down, or the rays might strike you! But be here, inside, and watch. And afterward, go quickly to join the Princess and your Elza. You understand?"

She clung to me, with her slim, white body pressed against my cloak. To anyone watching us, she would have seemed merely making love. Her eyes were provocative; her lips mocking me. But she was whispering, "Drop to the floor when Tarrano dances with the Red Woman—drop or the rays might strike you!"

Another girl was plucking at me from behind. Alda shouted: "You shall not have him!" and cast me off. But I heard her whisper, "Come outside for a moment—then come back!"—and then, aloud, she cried to the other girl, "You shall not have him! He is coming to watch me dive and swim! I am more beautiful than you—you could not win him from me!"

I let them drag me out into the grove by the scented pool.

CHAPTER XXII

Revolution!

I realize that I am, by nature, not overly observant; and in those moments, when I stood out there beside the pool, I think I came most forcibly to appreciate how little I habitually observe that which is not readily apparent. An incident now occurred to bring it home to me; and, quite suddenly, a score of things which I had seen during the past two hours at the festival were made plain.

Music, feasting, merry-making, love! In the midst of it all, an undercurrent of events was flowing. Unseen events—but I had partly seen some of them, and now, at last, I began to understand.

In the main hall of the pavilion, midway to its roof, a line of mirrors was placed along the wall facing Tarrano. A hundred small mirrors, side by side. On them were moving images of what was taking place in different parts of the festival—so that Tarrano and the others might see the merry-making, not only in the pavilion, but elsewhere, as well. It was interesting to watch the mirrors—and sometimes amusing. The scene of a gay battle of boats in a nearby lagoon; the diving girls in the pools; a view from the sky above of the whole scene; another, looking upward at the color bombs bursting overhead; a bridge on which a dozen girls were besieged by as many men, who sought to climb upward from their boats underneath, flowers for missiles, and the alcholite fumes which held off the attackers, or, perchance, caused a girl to fall into the water, to be instantly captured.

Other mirrors, eavesdropping upon the secluded islands, making public, for the amusement of the spectators in the pavilion, the furtive love-making of couples

who fancied themselves alone.

All this I had seen. And now I remembered that, occasionally, a mirror had gone dark, and then turned suddenly to a scene somewhere else. I understood now. Quiet incidents against Tarrano were in progress. The mirrors were being tampered with, that none of these events should be shown.

There were, scattered throughout the festival, fully a hundred men of Tarrano's guard. Some of them I knew by their uniforms; others were concealed by red masks and robes like myself. When first we entered the pavilion, some twenty or thirty of them had been there with us. But many of them did not stay; and now I remembered that, one by one, I had seen them slip away, lured by the slim, white shapes of girls who came from the pool to beguile them.

I realized now that these girls of the scented pool were very possibly all working for Maida. Most daring of all at the festival, these fifty girls who now disported themselves in the water at my feet. All beautiful, none beyond the first flush of earliest maturity. Slight, grey-white nymphs, laughing as they discarded their hampering veils, tossing their white hair as they plunged into the shimmering pool. Seemingly the most seductive, most abandoned of everyone.

Yet, as I stood there, I saw three of them climb from the water and, with gay shouts, rush into the pavilion. Back in a moment; and with them a flushed man—one of Tarrano's guards—flushed and flattered at their attention. His hat was gone, his robe disheveled, as the girls fought for him. They stopped quite close to me; and I saw that one of them was Alda.

"You shall not have him!" she shouted to her companions. "He is mine! He loves me—none of you!"

From her thick hair I saw her draw a tiny cylinder, wave it in the man's face. And, with another laugh, she flung her arms around his neck and fell with him into the water. I watched the splash and the ripples where they went down. In a moment, the girl came up—but the man did not. In all the confusion of the crowded pool, it was not very obvious.

A dozen, perhaps, of such incidents, which now, that I was alert to understand, were apparent. The mirrors might have shown some of them—but the mirrors always went dark just in time.

Tarrano's guards were disappearing. And now I saw a slaan skulking in the shadows of the shrubbery nearby. And I noticed, too, that this pool at my feet had a stream flowing outward from it—a waterway connecting it with the main lake. And I remembered the Earth man in sub-sea garb whom I had seen. Were there many Earth men down here in the water?

"When Tarrano dances with the Red Woman, you drop to the floor."

I remembered Alda's words and her admonition, "Be inside the pavilion." And presently I caught her glance as she was poised for a dive—and it seemed direct-

ing me to leave.

Wrapped in my drab cloak, I went back inside. The merry-making had increased; the place was more crowded than ever. I had been there but a moment when a gong sounded. The music stopped. In the hush Tarrano, on the balcony, rose to his feet.

"The tri-night hour[21] is here." He removed his mask; his face was grave, but a slight smile curved his thin lips. "Let us see ourselves now as we really are."

[Footnote 21: Half-way between midnight and dawn.]

He slipped his robe from his shoulders and stood in his festive costume. For so slight a man, I was surprised at the strength of him. Bands of gold-metal encircled his naked torso; a broad girdle of purple cloth hung from his waist. His bare limbs were lean and straight; sandals of red were on his feet. And a band about his forehead with a single feather in it.

Yet, for it all, he was no male nada, but every inch a man. Gravely smiling, as, with a gesture, he bade them all discard their masks and robes. From overhead the colored lights turned white. And in the glare, the robes and masks were dropped. Costumes grotesque, some of them; others symbolic; others merely beautiful. Vivid colors. Dancers daringly garbed, with whom the girls from the pool now mingled.

A moment of breathless silence; then ripples of applause from the spectators. And then the music and the dancing went on.

Barbaric costumes? Some frankly imitated the bygone ages of Venus, Mars and Earth. But the spirit that prompted them was decadence—nothing more.

Presently, as I stood unmasked in my effeminate garb, holding myself aloof from the girls who would have carried me off to the dancing floor, I saw the roof of the pavilion roll back. The open sky spread above us. And from it came down an effulgence of silver light, from a source high overhead. It bathed us all in its soft radiance; and, simultaneously, the lights in the pavilion went out. A single golden shaft rested on Tarrano. Elza, Georg and Maida were still there. In the golden light I could see them quite plainly—could see that Elza was flushed with suppressed excitement. Not the alcholite fumes now. Georg, too, seemed very alert. And Maida. There was, indeed, a tenseness about them all—an air of vague expectancy which made my heart beat faster as I realized it.

Was Tarrano totally unaware of what was about to happen? Was he unaware of this hidden, lurking menace to him, which now, to me, was so obvious? I could not believe that; yet, he was imperturbable, solemn as ever.

A shaft of golden light upon Tarrano. The darkened chamber. The silver radiance coming down upon us in a shaft from the sky. A hush lay upon the room. The music had ceased; now it began again, very soft, ethereal. Everyone in the room was gazing upward. From high overhead in the silver shaft a shape appeared,

slowly floating downward. A woman's figure. It came down, supported by what mechanical or scientific device I never knew. It seemed floating unsupported.

Within the pavilion, suspended in mid-air, I saw that it was a woman in filmy red veils. Poised on tip-toe in the air. Arms outstretched, with the red veils hanging from them like wings. A woman fully matured. White hair piled in coils on her head, with a huge, scarlet blossom in it. A face, somewhat heavy of feature, powdered white; with glowing eyes, dark lidded; and a scarlet mouth. A face, an expression in the smouldering eyes, the full lips half parted—a face and an expression that seemed the very incarnation of all that is sensuous in humans. The Red Woman! The living symbol of all that lay beneath this festive merry-making.

The Red Woman! For a moment she hovered there before us. A shaft of red light now came down from above. It caught her, bathed her in its lurid glow. On her face came a look of triumph, and a leer almost insolent, as slowly she began fluttering through the air toward Tarrano. He rose to meet her. Whispered something aside to Elza.

Close before him, the Red Woman hovered. And now a circle-dais from the floor came up to her. She rested upon it; began a slow, sinuous dance; one by one loosening the veils; the red light deepening until it painted her body red in lieu of the draperies.

No frivolous mockery here. Intense, smouldering eyes as she held her gaze on Tarrano's face and slowly raised her arms in invitation to him. At her gesture, he rose to his feet. Yet I knew he was not under her spell, for his lips were smiling, bantering.

But he rose obediently, and stepped from the balcony to the upraised dais. Around his neck the Red Woman wound her arms—white arms stained red by the lurid light.

A flash! I did not see from whence it came; but within me some subconscious impulse made me drop to the floor. The light from overhead was out. Momentary darkness. A woman's scream of terror. Then others. The sound of running feet; bodies falling. Panic in the crowd. Confusion everywhere.

Then light from somewhere came on. People were tramping me. I fought them off, climbed to my feet. On the dais the Red Woman lay dead. Huddled in a heap, with a brand of black searing her forehead. Slaans were leaping about the room—huge, half-naked men—brandishing primitive knives. Flashing steel, buried in the backs of the fleeing merry-makers. Other figures—Earth men they seemed—gripping the slaans, staying their murderous fury.

Tarrano? I did not see him at first. The air above the floor of the pavilion was full of snapping sparks—a battle of some unknown rays. The mirrors were shattered: glass from them was falling about me. Then, in the semi-gloom on the balcony, Tarrano's figure materialized. Invisible before, the hostile rays upon it now

made it apparent. But Tarrano seemed proof against the rays. I could see he was unharmed; and as he stood there, no doubt using a curved, duplicating beam, the like of which I have seen used in warfare, the image of him seemed to shift. Then it doubled—two images, one here, one further down the balcony. Then still others—appearing and disappearing, always in different places, until no one could have said where the man himself really was. A dozen Tarranos, each enveloped in hostile sparks, each with his face grinning at us in mockery.

Abruptly, I heard Georg's voice shout above the din: "Elza! Elza is gone!"

The images of Tarrano faded. He, too, was gone.

And then I saw Maida on the balcony, standing with upraised arms. Her voice rang out.

"Down with Tarrano! Death to Tarrano!" And then her pleading command:

"Slaans, no more bloodshed! Be loyal, slaans, to your Princess Maida!"

And Georg calling: "Loyalty, everyone, to your Princess Maida. Loyalty! Loyalty!"

CHAPTER XXIII

First Retreat

I must recount now what Elza later told me, going back to those moments when Elza sat upon the balcony watching Tarrano and the Red Woman. The significance of what had been transpiring at the Water Festival was not clear to Elza; she did not know what was impending, but as she sat there with Tarrano beside her, a sense of danger oppressed her. Danger which lay like a weight upon her heart. Yet several times she found herself laughing—hilarious; and from Maida's warning glance, and the steadying odor which Maida wafted to her, she knew that Tarrano was using the alcholite fumes to intoxicate her.

The Red Woman and Tarrano were upon the dais. There came a flash; then darkness. Elza went cold with terror. She sat stiff and silent, while around her surged that turmoil of confusion. The smell of chemicals was in the air; her skin prickled as with a million tiny needles where sparks now began to snap against it.

How long she crouched there, or what was happening, Elza did not know. But presently she heard Tarrano's voice in her ear.

"Come, Lady Elza, I must get you out of this." In the darkness his face glowed wraith-like. Then she felt his hand upon her arm.

"Come, we must leave here. I would not have you endangered."

With a haste and roughness that belied the calm solicitude of his words, he pulled her to her feet. There was light in the pavilion now. Elza saw dimly the turmoil of struggling figures; and then she saw the scene duplicated—saw it shift and sway in crazy fashion. Though she did not know it, she was looking out along

the curved rays which Tarrano was sending from them. Sparks were snapping everywhere. A second image of Tarrano appeared to the left of her—she saw it in a mirror nearby—yet he was at her right, gripping her arm.

"Hurry, Lady Elza."

She found herself being dragged along the balcony; stumbling over a body lying there; feeling a surge of heat and electric disturbance beat against her face. Then Tarrano had her in his arms, carrying her. She heard him curse as a sudden wave of fire seemed to strike them—hostile rays bringing a numbness to muscles and brain. Tarrano was fumbling at his belt; and through a shower of sparks he stumbled onward with his burden.

Elza's senses were fading. Vaguely she was conscious that Tarrano was carrying her down an incline to the ground. Grateful, cool air. Stars overhead. Trees; foliage; shimmering water. The screams and confusion of the pavilion growing fainter....

When Elza regained consciousness, she was lying in the bottom of a little boat, Tarrano beside her.

"So? You have awakened? We are quite safe, Lady Elza."

She and Tarrano were alone in the boat. It was long and very narrow, with its sides no more than a foot above the water. Tarrano sat at its chemical mechanism. A boat familiar to us of Earth. A small chemical-electric generator. The explosion of water in a little tank, with the resultant gases ejected through a small pipe projecting under the surface at its stern. The boat swept forward smoothly, rapidly and almost silently, with a stream of the gas bubbles coming to the surface in its wake.

"Quite safe, Lady Elza."

She saw that Tarrano's face was blackened with grime. His garments were burned, and hers were also. He was disheveled, but his manner was as imperturbable as ever. He made her comfortable on the cushions in the boat; drew a robe closer around her against the rush of the night air.

Elza was unhurt. She saw now, with clarifying senses, that they were plying along a narrow river. Banks of foliage on each side; the auroral lights in the sky; occasionally on the hillsides along the river, the dim outlines of a house.

It was all a trifle unreal—like looking through a sunglass that was darkened—for around the boat hung always a vague pall of gloom. Tarrano spoke of it.

"Our isolation barrage. It is very weak, but the best I can contrive. From these hills the naked eye, now at night could hardly penetrate it.... A precaution, for they will be searching for us perhaps.... Ah!..."

A white search-ray sprang from a house at the top of a hill nearby. It leaped across the dark countryside, swept the water—which at that point had broadened

into a lagoon—and landed upon the boat. It was a light strong enough to penetrate the barrage—the boat was disclosed to observers in the house. But Tarrano raised a small metal projector. A dull-red beam sprang from it and mingled with the other. A surge of sparks; then Tarrano's red beam conquered. It absorbed the white light. And Tarrano's beam was curved. It lay over the lake in a huge bow, bending far out to one side. Yet its other end fell upon the hostile house. The white search-ray from the house was submerged, bent outward with Tarrano's beam. From the house, the observer could only gaze along this curved light. He saw the image of the boat—not where the boat really was—but as though the ray were straight.

Elza, staring with her heart in her throat, saw a ball of yellow fire mount from the house. It swung into the air in a slow, lazy parabola, came down and dropped into the lake. But it fell where the marksman saw the boat, a safe distance to one side. A ball of fire dropping into the water, exploding the water all around it for a distance of a dozen feet. Like a cascade, the water mounted.

Tarrano chuckled. "A very bad marksman."

Other bombs came. It turns me cold when I think how orders like this could have come from the Great City—these bombs which had they found their mark would have killed Tarrano, but at the expense of the life of Elza. They did not find their mark. Tarrano continually changed the curve of his beam. The image of the boat shifted. A few moments only; and riding the waves of the bomb-tossed water, they rounded a bend, back into the narrow river and were beyond range.

Tarrano snapped off his ray. "Quite safe, Lady Elza. Do not be alarmed. I doubt if they will locate us again. They should be very busy now in the Great City. I'm surprised they could even think to notify this Station we have just passed."

We were indeed very busy in the Great City during those hours, as you shall presently hear.

Tarrano and Elza were not again disturbed. How far they went in the boat she does not know, but at last they landed in a sheltered cove. An air vehicle was there. Tarrano transferred Elza to it, and in a moment more they were aloft.

The vehicle was little more than an oblong platform, with a low railing. A platform of a substance resembling glascite-transparent; and with a glascite shield V-shaped in front to break the rush of wind and yet give vision. A mechanism, not of radio-power, but of gravity like the space-flyers. Such platforms had been, but were no longer in use on Earth. Elza had never seen one. It was a new experience for her, this flying with nothing above one, nothing to the side, or underneath save that transparent substance. To her it was like floating, and at times falling headlong through the air.

They rose no more than a thousand feet at first, and then swept parallel with the ground. At a tremendous speed; even at this height the forests seemed mov-

ing backward as the ground moves beneath a surface vehicle.

Dark, somber forests of luxuriant tropical vegetation. It was now nearing dawn; the auroral lights were dropping low in the sky; the great Venus Cross of Dawn was rising, its first two stars already above the line of hills to one side.

Then the sky out there flushed red; a limb of the glorious Sun of Venus came up. A new day. And even though the air was warm, within Elza was ashiver.

"It is very wonderful to me, my Elza, this being alone with you."

He sat beside her, gazing at her with his calm, impenetrable eyes. It was near noon of that day following their escape from the Water Festival. They had flown possibly two thousand miles. The Sun had risen, but after a time—since their enormous speed and change of latitude had affected the angle at which they viewed it—the Sun now was hanging almost level, not far above the horizon.

Beneath the platform—a mile below now—lay a tumbled waste of naked crags. The borders of the Cold Country! Tarrano's stronghold! The birthplace of his dreams of universal conquest.

Elza was staring downward. A barren waste. Rocks bare of verdure. Grey, with red ore staining them. A desolation of empty rock, with grey flat shadows. And far ahead, the broken, serrated ranks of mountains with rocky peaks, white-hooded with the snow upon their summits. The Cold Country. Bleak; forbidding.

This brittle air was cold; yet Elza and Tarrano were warm. Before the platform, a ray darted—a low-powered ray of a type that was to be so great a factor in the warfare into which we were all so soon to be plunged. It heated the air, so that the platform rushed always through a wind that was balmy.

"What did you say?" Elza looked up to meet Tarrano's steady gaze.

"I said it is wonderful to be thus alone with you, my Elza."

"Oh." She looked away.

He persisted; but his voice was gentle and earnest. "Soon we will be at my home, Lady Elza. And now—there are some things I would like to say while I have the opportunity.... You will listen?"

"Yes," she said; and tried to keep from him the trembling within her. "I'll listen, of course."

He nodded. "Thank you.... My Elza, you have heard me talk of conquering the world. My dream—my destiny. It will come to pass, of course. Yet—" A smile pulled at his lips. "Do you know, my Elza, what you and I are doing now?"

She stared, and he did not wait for her to answer.

"We're making my first retreat. I wonder if you can realize how I feel, having to admit that? Tarrano in retreat!... Our escape from Venia? Pouf! That was a jest. I was there on Earth merely to get you, and the Brende model. I had no thought of conquering the Earth just then. I accomplished my two purposes—and left.... It

was not a retreat, merely a planned departure.

"But this, my Elza, is very different. I did not wish to do what I am doing now. I had planned—I had thought, had actually hoped, that I might maintain myself in the Great City. You see, I tell you this, little girl, because—well I am a lonely man. I walk alone—and because I am human—it does me good to have someone to talk to. I had hoped I might maintain myself in the Great City. Last night—at the start of the Water Festival—I began to realize it was impossible. I should have enlisted the Rhaals—the men of science, Elza. But I had no time, and they are very aloof. I could have won them to me had I tried." He shrugged. "I must confess I was overconfident of my strength—the strength of my position. The Rhaals stayed out of the affair—stayed in their own city, which has always been their policy. That was what I expected, but now I see I should have had their aid. I did—well what I did to guard against the unhappy outcome you witnessed—what I did was wrongly planned. You see, I take all the blame. I alone am responsible for my destiny. There are some who in defeat cry bitterly, 'Luck! That cursed luck was against me!' Not so! Leadership is not a matter of luck. Destiny is what you make it. You see?

"And so now I am making my first retreat. A set-back, nothing more. I shall launch my forces from the City of Ice, instead of marshalling them from the Central State as I had planned. And Mars is still mine. I still control Mars, little Elza.... A set-back just now—and it bothers me. It hurts my pride—and as you know, my Elza, Tarrano is very proud."

She had been listening to him, her fingers plucking idly at her robe. He bent closer to her; his voice turned tender. "I was thinking that perhaps—just perhaps you would scorn Tarrano in his triumphs, you might feel differently toward him now—in his first retreat. Do you?"

She forced her eyes up to his again. "I'm—sorry—from your viewpoint, I mean—that things are going wrong."

He smiled gently. "You are very conservative, Lady Elza. You want very much to avoid hypocrisy, don't you?"

"Yes," she said frankly. "You could hardly expect me to be sorry at your defeat."

"Defeat?" He rasped out the word, and his laugh was harsh. "You are too optimistic. Defeat? Things going wrong? That is not so. A slight set-back. A strategic retreat—and in a week I will have regained more than I have lost.... Oh, Lady Elza! I who would now—and always—be so gentle with you—why we are almost quarreling! That is not right. For the lives of a thousand of my servants, I would not have used that tone to you just now. Forgive me....

"I was saying, my Elza—could not you feel more kindly to me now. A little hope from those gentle eyes of yours—a little word from those red lips—a word of

hope for what some day might be for us—you and me—''

She dared to try and turn the subject. ''You mentioned the Brende model—where is it? Have you it in the Cold Country?''

He frowned. ''Yes. And I will use it—for you and me alone. You've always known that, haven't you? Just for you and me, my Elza.'' He took her hand. ''Won't you try and love me—just a trifle?''

She did not move. ''I—don't know.'' Then she faced him squarely. ''I do not love you, Tarrano.'' Something in his eyes—a quality of pleading; a wistful smile upon his lips—suddenly struck her as pathetic. Strange and queerly pathetic that such a man as he should be reduced to wistfulness. Emotion swept her. Not love. A feeling of sympathy; a womanly desire to lighten his sorrow; to sympathize and yet to withhold from him the happiness he sought.

''I do not love you, Tarrano. But I do respect you. And I am sorry—''

''Respect! I have told you I can command that from everyone. But love—your love—''

''I would give it if I could, Tarrano.''

''You mean—you're trying to love me—and cannot?''

''I mean—Oh, I don't know what I mean, save that I do not love you yet.''

He smiled. ''I think you speak the truth when you say you do not know what you mean. Your love! If I had it, I should know that I would have it always. But—having it not—'' He was very sincere, but his smile broadened. ''Having it not, my Elza, there is no power in all the heavens that can tell me how to get it. It may be born in a moment from now—or never. Who can tell?''

She was silent; and after a moment, he added: ''Enough of this. I would ask you just one thing. You are not afraid of me, are you?''

''No,'' she said; and at that moment she meant it.

''I would not have you ever be afraid, Lady Elza. Love is not conceived by fear. And you must know I could never force my love upon you. For if I did—I should withhold forever the birth of this love of yours which is all I seek—this love I am trying to breathe into life.... Enough!''

He did not mention the subject again. For hours—eating what meager stock of tabloid food with which their vehicle was provisioned—they flew onward. Rising now to top the line of jagged mountains. Over them the platform swept. In the crisp air the snow down there gleamed blue-white; the ice with an age-old look filled the valleys between the peaks.

The arctic! It was nothing like the Polar regions of Earth. Stark desolation. A naked land seemingly upheaved by some gigantic cataclysm of nature, lying tumbled and broken where it had fallen in convulsive agony; and then congealed forever in a grip of ice.

The Sun hung level as the vehicle advanced. In these latitudes it would swing side-wise in a slow, low arc, to dip again below the horizon and vanish. Here in the Cold Country it was morning of the Long Day. Summer!

On over the crags and glaciers Tarrano guided their frail flying platform. Houses occasionally showed now—huts of ice, congealed dwellings, blue-white in the flat sunlight.

And then at last, over the horizon came the ramparts of a city. The City of Ice! The size of it—the evidences of civilization here in this brittle land of deadly cold—made Elza gasp with wonderment.

CHAPTER XXIV

Attack on the Palace

I must take you back now to the Water Festival and the events in the Great City which followed it. Slaans in murderous frenzy were plunging through the throng of erstwhile revelers. Maida could not quell them. The revolt which she had started against Tarrano seemed now a self-created monster to destroy us all.

But there were Earth men among us. A hundred of them, no more. They had come from Washington that same day; had landed, I learned later, secretly near the Great City, sent with our Earth Council's plans to communicate with Maida. Beneath the water, coming individually, they had entered the festival; and helping Maida's girls (the diving girls whom I had encountered) they had made away with most of Tarrano's guards.

In those first moments of frenzy, I got to the balcony—joined Maida and Georg. Elza was gone! My heart went cold, but in those hurried, frantic moments, grave disaster as it was, I did not dwell upon it.

"We must get away—back to the palace!" Georg exclaimed as I joined them.

The Earth men on the main floor were holding the slaans partially in check. Bodies were lying in a welter—I shall not describe it. Then abruptly, upon a table a huge slaan leaped—his garments blood-stained from his victims, a blade of dripping steel in his hands. He shouted above the tumult—words not in the universal language, but in the dialect of the slaans. His command carried throughout the building. Other slaans took it up; we could hear it echoed outside as others shouted it over the waters.

The bloodshed abruptly ceased. The slaans leaped away from the Earth men, who were glad enough to let them go—rushed for the archways of the pavilion. Outside, we could hear the water splashing. Swimmers—and boats scurrying off. Then comparative silence. The scream of a slaan woman in the grove nearby, still desiring vengeance; the groans of the dying at our feet; the hiss and splutter of weapons discarded, with circuits still connected. And over it all, the great whine of a danger whistle, which some distant official had plugged.... A lull. And around

us lay strewn stark tragedy where a few moments before had been festive merry-making. A crimson scene, with the body of the Red Woman lying like a symbol in its midst....

Within an hour we were back at the palace. The whole city was seething. Boats and lights were everywhere. Control of everything seemed lost. Warning signals shrilled in crazy fashion. Public mirrors were dark, or turned to places and time wholly irrelevant.

In the palace itself we soon secured a semblance of order. Maida's girls were here, with wet veils and long dank tresses clinging to their sleek bodies. Lips painted alluring red. But eyes which now were solemn and grim. Their demeanor alert and business-like. Unconscious of themselves they moved about the palace, executing Maida's orders.

A dozen or so of Maida's personal retainers were here—and most of the Earth men. Keen-eyed young men of the Washington Headquarters Staff. One of them—Tomm Aften by name, a ruddy, blue-eyed fellow—was in command. He stayed close by Georg and me.

The city was seething. But out of the chaos was coming a comparatively orderly menace. We could sense it at first; and then in a few brief minutes so swift that we had no time to prepare—the menace became obvious and was at hand.

The slaans had withdrawn from the festival for a greater, more organized effort. Their revolt against Tarrano in which Maida had joined, was bigger, more deep-rooted than a mere revolt. It was against Maida herself. Trickery of the downtrodden slaans against the ruling class. Against the old order of government. Even against the Rhaals, who in their distant city were all-powerful, but who obeyed the laws and took no part in anything.

Revolution! From down the waterways of streets which converged into the broad lagoon before the palace, boats began arriving. Boats crowded with slaans. Disheveled, unkempt men and women with primitive weapons of steel and wire brandished aloft. They surged into the lagoon. A murderous, frenzied mob—thoughtless of itself, suicidal to attack us, yet daring everything in its frenzy.

Soon the lagoon was crowded—a chaos of pushing, shoving boats. Then the boats began landing, disgorging their occupants, wild-eyed slaans each a potential murderer. The gardens of the palace were presently jammed with them. They did not at first come within our threshholds; they stood milling about under the palms, trampling the tropic flowers, screaming threats and epithets at us. But waiting—as a mob always does—for some leader to advance, that they might follow him upon us.

We stood on the palace roof-top. I must confess that we were in a flurry for the moment. There were undoubtedly weapons at hand, but I at least did not have them, nor did I know where they were. Excusable flurry possibly for the thing had

come so quickly, and most of us were strangers here of but a few hours.

The roof had a low railing waist-high, but broad. We stood clustered behind it. In the garden beneath, the mob was shouting up at us. And, before I could stop her, Maida had leaped to the top of the rail. Georg and I clutched at her, then steadied her.

"Slaans—"

But they would not hear her. Shouts went up; a roar of threats. The press of additions to the mob landing from other boats, forced the front ranks forward. They were now on the palace steps, jammed there waving their weapons yet still hesitating to advance.

"Slaans—my people—"

Maida's frail voice was lost in the uproar. Then a missle was thrown upward—a portion of a broken generator—a heavy chunk of metal. It barely missed Maida, and fell with a thump to the roof behind us. Then came others—a rain of them about us. I tried to pull Maida back, but she fought me, her voice still calling out its appeal.

With a bound, Georg was up on the rail beside her. Aften—the young Earth man—had quietly handed him a cylinder. Georg waved it at the mob.

"Slaans—" His stronger voice caught their attention. A sudden hush fell.

"Slaans—it is I, Georg Brende. Your Princess Maida rules you now only under me. A new ruler, slaans—the man of Earth—Georg Brende who must be obeyed—Georg Brende, soon to be husband of your Princess—"

But they would not hear him out. The din from them submerged his voice. His lips snapped tight as abruptly he ceased talking; his brows lowered grimly and I saw his finger press upon the cylinder.

Maida's voice screamed: "Georg! Have mercy! Do not kill them!"

She spoke barely in time. His cylinder swept upward. The rays from it caught only the upper portions of the palms and the tree tops. The foliage withered, shriveled before that soundless, invisible blast.

Not a blast of heat. The mob, surprised, then frightened, stared upward. The soft tropical foliage in a great wide swath was dead, with naked sticks of limbs. Black, then turning white. Not with heat—but cold. Ice was forming from the moisture in the humid air. And then the sudden condensation brought snow—a thick white fall of it sifting down into the palm-laden garden; falling gently, then swirling in a sudden wind which had begun.

As though itself stiffened by the cold just overhead, the mob stood transfixed. Then a murmur of horror came. And I saw through the veil of whirling snow, that into some of the trees slaans had climbed. Their bodies, frozen now, slid and fell—black plummets hurtling downward through the swirling snow-flakes.

CHAPTER XXV

Immortal Terror

To Elza, approaching with Tarrano on the tiny flying platform the City of Ice, the place seemed truly like a child's dream of Fairyland. The rude snow huts of the Arctic of our Earth were all that she had ever conceived could be built of frozen water. Here, in the outskirts of the city, she saw indeed, quite similar huts. But further in—ornate buildings several stories high. She caught a vague glimpse of them only, as the platform flew above them and descended in the center of the city.

They had passed over great outer encircling ramparts—a huge wall many helans long—built entirely of ice blocks—fortifications like that fabled wall which in the dim history of our Earth had once encircled a portion of the domain of the Yellow Race.

The platform came down before a central building—the Palace of Ice. Even in this dim daylight of the Cold Country summer, the great building gleamed and glittered resplendent. A building of many levels, storied and winged, with spider bridges and aerial arcades connecting the wings. Frescoed everywhere! ornate with carved design chipped in ice blocks hard as marble. Rolling terraces of snow and ice surrounded it—lawns of smooth white, with winding paths of ice. A many balconied building; towers, spires and minarets crowning it. All blue-white. Glittering. Seemingly fragile; from a distance, a toy—a sample of the ultra-skill of some master confectioner, as though the whole thing were a toy of sugar for children to admire. But at close range—solid; in the cold of this terrible region, as solid as though constructed of blocks of stone.

With the flying platform landed, and its warming rays cut off, attendants rushed forward. Tarrano and Elza were wrapped in furs at once—heavy furs which covered them from head to foot.

"Well! Well, Graten!" Tarrano greeted his subordinate smilingly. "Things are in condition here? You got my message?"

"Yes, Master. All is in good fashion here. We welcome you."

In his furs, with face almost hidden, Elza could not see what manner of man this was.

They entered the palace. Frescoed; carved everywhere, within as without. The main doorway led into a palatial hall, carpeted with furs. It was warm. Tarrano discarded his fur, and helped Elza out of hers.

"You like my home, Lady Elza?"

"It's—beautiful," she answered.

His smile showed amusement at the wonder and awe which stamped her expression. He added very gently:

"I had in mind when I built it, the hope that you would be pleased."

A comfortable interior warmth. Elza noticed little blurs of red light behind wire cages here and there. The warmth came from them; and a glow of pale white light from the tubes along the wall.

A woman hurried to them. Tara! Elza recognized her at once. Tara, looking very pretty in a pale blue robe, with her hair done high upon her head. The woman who loved Tarrano; he had sent her on here to be rid of her, when he went to the Great City. She came forward. Pleasure was on her face at seeing Tarrano; but her glance as she turned it momentarily toward Elza, held again that smouldering jealousy.

Tarrano was evidently in a mood of high good humor.

"You welcome me prettily, Tara." She had flung her arms about him. "Tara, my dear is——"

"Master—you come but in time. They are working the Brende instrument. Already they have——"

"They? Who?" He frowned. His words were hard and cold as the ice-blocks around him.

"Woolff. And the son of Cretar. Many of them—using it now!"

Tarrano drew Elza with him. Tara led the way. Through glowing white hallways, an arcade; down steps and an incline—to burst at last through a tunnel-like passage into a room.

"So? What is this, Cretar?"

A room littered with apparatus. A dozen men were about. Men scantily dressed in this interior heat. Short, squat men of the Cold Country; flat-nosed, heavy faces; hair long to the base of the neck. In a corner stood the Brende instrument, fully erected. A light from it seemed penetrating the bared chest of a man who was at that moment standing in its curative rays.

He whom Tarrano called Cretar, took a step forward.

"Master, we——"

"Making yourselves immortal?" The anger had left Tarrano's voice; irony was there instead.

"Master——"

"Have you done that?"

"Master—yes! Yes! We did! Forgive us, Master."

The man before the instrument had retreated from it. Elza saw now that all the men were shrinking back in terror. All save Cretar, who had fallen tremblingly to his knees. Yet Tarrano showed no anger. He laughed.

"I would not hurt you, Cretar! Get up, man! I am not angry—not even annoyed. Why, your skin is turning orange. See the mottles!"

On the flesh of all the men—save the one who had been checked in the act of using the instrument—a bright orange mottling was apparent. Cretar exclaimed:

"The immunity to all diseases, master. It is itself a disease—harmless—and it combats every other." He laughed a little wildly. "We cannot get sick now. We cannot die—we are immortal. Come, Master—let us make you so!"

Tarrano whispered: "You see, Lady Elza? The orange spots! These men of medicine here have used the Brende secret to its full. Immune from disease!"

"Let us treat you, Master. This immortality——"

On Cretar's face was a triumphant smile, but in his eyes lay a terror. The man who had not been treated stood against the wall watching with interest and curiosity. But the others! They crouched; wary; alert eyes like animals at bay.

Tarrano laughed. "Treat me! Cretar, you know not with what you have been trifling. Immortal? You are indeed. Disease cannot touch you! You cannot die—save by violence!"

He swung to Elza. "These men, Lady Elza—they are strong-muscled. In health now more perfect than any other humans. You are frail—a frail little woman. And unarmed. I bid you--strike one of them!"

She stared; but as she suddenly faced about, she caught in part his meaning. Before her Cretar shrank back, his face gone white, his teeth chattering.

"What's that behind you?" Tarrano's voice simulated sudden alarm; he scuffled his feet on the floor. The men jumped with fright; nerves unstrung, they cowered.

"What manner of men!" Tarrano's laugh was contemptuous. "Oh, Lady Elza, let this be a lesson to all of us! To cure disease is well. To prevent it—that too is good. But immortality—Dr. Brende never intended it, you know he did not, Lady Elza—the belief that we have everlasting life here on this plane—the Creator never intended that. With all danger of death gone—save violence—these immortals here fear violence so greatly that they are men no longer!

"Immortal terror! God forbid I should ever feel it! Or you, Lady Elza. A lesson for us all, who would be so un-Godly as to seek and think we have found what only the Creator Himself can bestow!"

CHAPTER XXVI

Black Cloud of Death

I must revert now to that time in the gardens of Maida's palace at the Great City when we stood upon its roof-top, threatened below by that mob of slaans. Georg stood with the cylinder in his hand, waving it. The palm foliage was freezing. Down through the swirling snow fell the frozen bodies of the slaans who had climbed into the gigantic palm fronds. The thuds as the bodies struck the ground sounded horribly plain in the stillness. Georg was still waving his cylinder. Snow

and ice were gathering everywhere. Incautiously he lowered the weapon; a brief, momentary chill—the congealing breath of the Arctic in this warm palm-laden garden—swept the horror-stricken crowd.

"Georg, have mercy!"

Maida's frightened, pleading words brought Georg to his senses. He snapped off the cylinder and dropped it behind him to the palace roof-top. He was trembling and white as he stood with his arm around Maida. Weapons so drastic as this one were seldom used. Indeed, it was law throughout both Venus and the Earth that no civilian should possess them. The power for wholesale death in his hand, and which without wholly meaning to, he had so nearly used to its full effect, had unnerved him.

Without the ray, the wind soon died. The warmer air mounting, melted the ice; the snow ceased falling. But the swath of shriveled foliage remained—a hideous scar cut into the luxuriant tropical growth.

The mob had forgotten its threats, its evil intent. Silent for a moment, it now burst into outcries. Motionless: then milling about, struggling aimlessly with itself—struggling to retreat. A panic of terror. The boats in the lagoon were retreating. The slaans along the fringe of shore began hurriedly to embark. The groups huddled at the palace steps were trying to shove the others back. In a rout they tumbled into their boats and scurried away. Maida's voice, striving to reassure them, was unheard.

And presently the scarred, trampled garden was empty and silent.

The rebellion, checked thus at its start, was quelled. Throughout the city that night—for the slaans to hear whether they would or no—the broadcast stations flung their stentorian tones to the people; a speech by Maida; her promise of better things to come for the slaans; the end of Tarrano's brief rule; a reorganization of past conditions. Maida herself had never been in control in the Central State. The luxury—the license-of the ruling class had been no fault of hers. She promised fair treatment now to the slaans. She was to marry Georg Brende, the Earth man.

Maida did marry Georg. With the many stirring events—a time when disaster and death threatened us all—so soon to follow, I shall not pause to describe the wedding. A quaint, yet magnificent spectacle. Maida in her regal robe; Georg looking every inch a ruler. Their barge of white leading the procession—a barge of white flowers, its sides lined with maidens to fend off the deluge of blossoms with which the onlookers assailed the bridal couple. The arrival at the marriage island, where on an altar the quaintly garbed holy man immersed them; and the solemn men of law united them as one.

It was a night of rejoicing throughout the Great City; and on every mirror in the Empire it was pictured for those who could not be present.

A time of rejoicing. Yet then—as always those days—my heart was heavy. Elza was held by Tarrano. We knew he had taken her to the City of Ice. There was of course, no radio communication with the Cold Country. We had tried eavesdropping upon it, but to no avail. Tarrano's close-flung barrage checked every wave we could send against it.

Time passed—a month or more. We were worried over Elza naturally. Yet the saving grace was that we knew Tarrano would treat her kindly; that for the present at least, she was in no danger.

Georg and Maida took possession of the Central State. Their rule started auspiciously, for by a series of speeches—a reorganization of money payments—the slaans seemed well satisfied. Loyal, and with a growing patriotism, an eagerness to help in the coming war with Tarrano. Georg—without actually saying so—made them believe that the only hope of everlasting life was the recovery from Tarrano of the Brende model. The model was in the City of Ice; it must be captured.

As a matter of fact, to us of the government, the Brende model was not indispensable. The greatest factor was that the threat of Tarrano's universal conquest must be forever removed. Like a rocket-bomb, this man of genius had risen from obscurity—had all but conquered the three greatest worlds of the universe.

I think that the height of Tarrano's power was reached that day on the eve of the Water Festival when he made his triumphant entry into the Great City. Venus was his at that moment; all of Venus. Mars was his; the Hairless Men—savages who had fallen readily to his wiles, had conquered the civilized, ruling Little People. And the Earth, over-run by his spies, deluged by his propaganda which, insidiously as rust will eat away a metal, was eating into the loyalty of our Earth-public—our own great Earth was in a dangerous position. The Earth Council realized it. The Almighty only could know how many of our officials, our men in trusted positions, were at heart loyal to Tarrano!

The thing was obvious. The assassination of our three rulers—leaders of the white, yellow and black races—with which Tarrano's campaign in the open had begun—those assassinations could never have taken place had not our military organization been diseased.

Facts like these were constantly coming to us now, here in the Great City. A brief time of physical inactivity. Yet underneath the calm, we realized there was a struggle going on everywhere; a struggle of sentiment, of propaganda, of public opinion.

Warfare, with modern weapons by which a man single-handed might destroy a city—is no longer a matter of men. The citizen—unarmed—united in sentiment and desire with a million of his kind—becomes the real ruler. You cannot—because you have a weapon—destroy a million of your brothers.

We realized this. And in the ultimate decision—the popular fancy almost—of

our publics—lay our real success or downfall.

Tarrano in the popular mind had a tremendous hold. Dispatches from Earth made it plain that upon every street level the people were discussing him. From the Great City daily we sent bulletins of our progress toward checking—destroying—the menace of him. But bulletins also were emanating from the City of Ice. We could not stop them. Cut off at every official Earth station—and with all unofficial stations unable to receive them—nevertheless at some secret station which could not be found, they were received. And from there, circulated throughout the Earth. The air was full of them. Mysteriously, scenes showing the great Tarrano appeared upon the official news-mirrors; a speech of Tarrano's was once officially broadcasted before its source could be located and stopped.

Like a smothered fire smouldering, lacking only a breath of vital gas to explode it into flame, the sentiment for Tarrano spread about the Earth.

Public opinion is fickle. It sways instinctively—not always, but often—to the winning side. Here in Venus we knew we must defeat Tarrano. Destroy him personally and thus put an end to it all forever, since his dominion hung wholly upon the genius of his own personality.

Our spies, some of them, got to the City of Ice, and back. A few flying men were able to hover about the city, and with instruments peer down into it. We knew that Tarrano was mobilizing for a move upon the Earth, where with a warlike demonstration he hoped to be accepted, yielded to, without a severe struggle. But, within a month now, we learned he had abandoned that idea. He knew, of course, our own preparations to attack him; and he began concentrating everything upon his own defense in the City of Ice.

His last stand. We officials knew it. And we knew he felt it also. And though on Earth our public felt differently, the Little People recognized it. A stirring, wonderful time—that day when on our mirrors was pictured the revolt of the Little People against the Tarrano rule of the Hairless Men. Grim scenes of tragedy; and over the carnage, the Little People triumphed. Tarrano's rule—with all the excesses of the Hairless Men who proved themselves mere rapacious plunderers in the name of warfare—was at an end on Mars.

The effect on Earth of this Martian reversal was beneficial to us. A good omen. We on Venus, redoubled our efforts to attack successfully the City of Ice.

Mars could send us no aid, though now in full sympathy with us. The planet was daily at a greater distance from us; and the Little People, not recovered from the effects of their own bloody strife, were in no position to help us.

Nor did the Earth Council deem it wise to send men additional to those few we already had. The Earth was rapidly being left behind by the swifter flight of Venus through her orbit. The official season for the mail-flyers was closed. The opposition of the two planets was long since passed; millions of additional miles were

adding to the space separating them.

And the Earth Council was not sure of its men! Any one of them might secretly be in Tarrano's service—and do us infinitely more harm if brought to Venus, than if left at home.

We seemed of solid strength in the Central State. For the first time in generations the Rhaals—the men of science from whom all the progress of civilization on Venus came—departed from their attitude of aloofness. Their work—always before industrial—now turned to the sterner demands of war.

The Rhaal City[22] lay a brief flight from us. A grave sort of people, these Rhaals. Men of square-cut, sober-colored garments; women of sober grey flowing robes—white hair coiled upon their heads. Intelligent women, dignified of demeanor; many of them learned as were the men.

[Footnote 22: An awkward, unpronounceable word which for the purposes of this narrative may be termed Industriana.]

Their city, teeming now with the preparations for war, was intensely interesting to me. We spent most of our days in it, flying back at nightfall to Maida's palace. Yet I shall not describe it, nor our preparations, our days of activity—but hasten on to the first of the extraordinary incidents impending.

It came—this first incident—through my thoughts of Elza. I was worried—more than worried, sometimes almost terrified about her. My instinct would have been to take a handful of men and dash to her rescue—which of course would have been absurd. I tried to reassure myself. Tarrano would treat her kindly. Soon, in full force, our army would descend upon the City of Ice, capture it, destroy Tarrano—rescue Elza.

Rescue Elza! Ah, there lay the difficulty which I never dared contemplate in detail. How would we rescue her? Tarrano would treat her kindly, now during his own security. But if, at the last, he saw his own defeat, his death perhaps impending—would he treat her kindly then?

I loved Elza very deeply. A new torture came from it now. Did she love me—or Tarrano? I remembered the gentleness of the man with her. His dignity, his power—his undoubted genius. And who, what was I? A mere news-gatherer. A man of no force, and little personality. A nonentity. Sometimes as in my jealousy I contemplated Elza with Tarrano now, I felt that he was everything a young girl would fancy. How could she help loving him?

At night, when sleep would not come to me, I would lie tossing, thinking of it. Did Elza love me—or Tarrano? Once I had thought she loved me. But she had never said so.

It was out of this constant thinking of Elza that the first of the incidents I have mentioned, arose. There came to me one night the feeling that Elza was near me. I awoke from half sleep to full wakefulness. In my bedroom, upon the low couch

on which I lay, the aural lights of Venus spread their vivid tints. The palace was silent; I sat up, pressing my palms to my throbbing temples.

Elza was coming nearer to me!

I knew it. Not by any of my bodily senses. A knowledge, which suddenly I realized that I had. A moment, and then I was conscious of her voice! No sound; my ears heard nothing. Yet my brain was aware of familiar tones. I recognized them, as one can remember how a loved voice sounded when last it was heard.

But this was no memory. A present actuality; it rang soundless in my brain. Elza's voice. Anxious! Frightened!

At first only the confused tone of it. Then the consciousness of words. Two reiterated words:

"Danger! Jac! Danger! Jac!"

I waited no longer, but rushed to Georg and Maida—beautiful Maida in her robe of sleep with her white hair tumbling about her. Georg half awake—yet almost at once he could understand me, and explain.

Natural, instinctive telepathy! It had not occurred to me. I had never bothered to develop telepathy; and indeed with any degree of fluency—or even of surety of reception—the phenomenon is difficult to perfect. Yet, as I knew, with a loved one absent upon whom one's thoughts dwell constantly—in time of stress telepathy is occasionally automatically established.

It was so in Georg and Maida's case, back there in the Mountain Station on Earth. Telepathy was the explanation of Georg's mysterious actions as he stood there before the sending mirrors, crossed the room in confusion, and like one in a dream leaped from the window to be seized by Tarrano's spies. Maida had been abducted a moment before. Georg's brain became aware of it. Her danger, the appeal she sent to him.

So it now seemed to be from Elza to me. Georg, out of bed now beside me, urged me to greater efforts of concentration, that I might understand what message Elza was sending.

"Elza! Elza dear! Where are you? What is it?"

I murmured the words to myself as with all my power, I thought them over and over, flinging out the thoughts like radio waves into the night. Mysterious vibrations! In an instant, from here—everywhere in the universe. Who knows their character? Their speed? The speed of light a laggard perhaps beside the flash of a thought! Waves of my thoughts, speeding through the night, with only one receiving station in all the universe! Would Elza's brain capture them?

"Elza dear! Where are you? What is it?"

"Jac! Danger! Jac! Danger!"

It was very clear. The words rang in my head. But always only those two. And

then at last—it may have been an hour later—other words:

"Death! The black cloud of death! You can see it coming! See it coming! Death! To you Jac! To all of you in the city!"

We rushed to the casement. The broad lagoon before the palace lay like a mirror tinted red and purple. Beyond it, palms and the outlines of houses lay dark against the star-strewn sky.

But out there, over the city, in the distance a dark patch obscured the stars. We watched it breathless. A dark patch which soon took shape. A cloud! A black cloud—unnatural of aspect somehow—a rolling, low-lying black cloud. Growing larger; spreading out side-wise; sweeping toward the city on a wind which had not reached us.

"Jac! Jac dear! Danger! Death to all the city!"

Elza's words were still beating in my brain. Soundless words of terror and warning!

"Death, Jac! Death to all the city! The black cloud of death!"

CHAPTER XXVII

Tarrano the Man

"Wake up, Lady Elza."

A silence. His hand touched her white shoulder. "Wake up, Lady Elza. It is I—Tarrano."

Elza opened her eyes, struggling to confused wakefulness. The white walls of her sleeping room in Tarrano's palace of the City of Ice were stained with the dim red radiance of her night light. She opened her eyes to meet Tarrano's inscrutable face as he bent over her couch; became conscious of his low, insistent, "Wake up, Lady Elza;" and his fingers half caressing the filmy scarf that covered her shoulders.

Terror flooded Elza; that time she had always feared, had come. Yet she had the presence of mind to smile, drawing away from him and sitting up, with the fur bed-covering pulled to her chin.

"Tarrano? Why—"

He straightened, and into his expression came apology.

"I frightened you, Lady Elza? I'm sorry. I would not do that for all the worlds."

Her terror receded. The old Tarrano over whom she still held sway. She summoned a look of haughty questioning.

"You are bold, Tarrano—"

His gesture was deprecating; he seated himself on the edge of her couch. She saw now that he was fully dressed and armed with a belt of many instruments.

At this time Elza had been in the City of Ice for a considerable period. Irksome, worried days of semi-imprisonment; and through them, Tarrano's attitude toward her was unchanged. She saw little of him; he seemed very busy, though to what end, and what his activities, she could not learn.

Within the palace, half as guard, half as maid-servant, Tara was generally Elza's only companion. And then, one evening when Tara's smouldering jealousy broke forth in Tarrano's presence and Elza uttered an involuntary cry of fear, Tara was summarily removed.

Elza was left practically alone; until at length came this night when invading the privacy of her sleeping room, Tarrano awakened her. He sat now upon the edge of her couch.

"I have a confession to make to you, Lady Elza." He smiled slightly. "As you know, there is no one else in our habitable universe to whom I would speak thus frankly."

"I am honored, Tarrano. But here, at this hour of sleep—"

He waved away the words. "I have asked your pardon for that. My confession—as once before, Lady Elza, I come to you most humbly, confessing that my affairs are not going as I would like. You do not know, of course, that Mars—"

"I know nothing," she interrupted. "You have kept me from the news-mirrors, if indeed there are any here—"

"Mars revolted against me," he went on imperturbably. "The Little People are again in control. Fools! They do not realize, those governors of Mars, that their public ultimately will demand this Everlasting Life of mine—the Brende secret—"

She frowned. "No one knows better than you, Tarrano, that my father's secret does not bestow immortality. To cure disease, in a measure—"

He checked her; his smile was ironical. "You and I know that, Lady Elza. We know that on this plane we would not want everlasting life if we could have it. But the public does not know that—let us not discuss it. I was telling you—confessing to you—I have lost Mars. Temporarily, of course. Meanwhile, I have been preparing to invade the Earth." His gesture was expansive. "I have been planning, from here in the Cold Country, to send armies to your Earth."

He paused an instant. "I think now I shall wait until the next opposition—we are far from Earth now, but all in good time we shall be closer.... Strange is it not, that I should like to tell you my plans?"

She did not answer; she watched his smile fading into a look of grimness. "In the Great City, here on Venus, they are getting ready to attack me. Did you know that?"

"No," she said.

"You supposed they were? Your brother, and that Jac Hallen?"

"Yes."

"And you hoped they were, of course?"

"Yes," she repeated.

He frowned. "You are disconcertingly frank, Lady Elza. Well, let me tell you this—it would come to nothing. The Rhaals are with them—all the resources of the Central State are to be thrown against me. Yet it will come to nothing."

Her heart leaped. Tarrano was making his last stand. Beyond the logical sense of his words, she could see it in his eyes. He knew he was making his last stand. He knew too that she was now aware of it; and that behind the confidence of his words—that was the confession he was making.

Tarrano's last stand! There seemed to her then something illogically pathetic in it all. This man of genius—so short a time ago all but the Emperor of three worlds. And now, with them slipping from his grasp, reduced to this last stronghold in the bleak fastnesses of the Cold Country, awaiting the inevitable attack upon him. Something pathetic....

"I'm sorry, Tarrano."

As though mirrored from her own expression, a wistful look had come to him. Her words drove it away.

"Sorry? There is nothing to be sorry about. Their attack will come to nothing ... yet—" He stopped short, and then as though deciding to say what he had begun, he added:

"Yet, Lady Elza, I am no fool to discard possibilities. I may be defeated." He laughed harshly. "To what depths has Tarrano fallen that he can voice such a possibility!"

He leaned toward her and into his tone came a greater earnestness than she ever heard in it before.

"Lady Elza, if they should be successful, they would not capture me—for I would die fighting. You understand that, don't you?"

She met his eyes; the gleam in them held her. Forgetful of herself, she had allowed the fur to drop from her: she sat bolt upright, the dim red light tinting the scarf that lay like gossamer around her white shoulders. His hand came out and touched her arm, slipped up to her shoulder and rested there, but she did not feel it.

"I will die fighting," he repeated. "You understand that?"

"Yes," she breathed.

"And you would be sorry?"

"Oh—"

"Would you?"

"Yes, I—"

He did not relax. His eyes burned her: but deep in them she saw that quality of wistfulness, of pleading.

"You, my Elza, they would rescue—unless I killed you."

She did not move, but within her was a shudder.

"You know I would kill you, my Elza, rather than give you up?"

"Yes," she murmured.

"I—wonder. Sometimes I think I would." Suddenly he cast aside all restraint. "Oh, my Elza—that we should have to plan such things as these! You, sitting there—you are so beautiful! Your eyes—limpid pools with terror lurking in them when I would have them misty with love! My Elza—"

The woman in her responded. A wave of color flooded her throat and face. But she drew away from him.

"My Elza! Can you not tell me that even in defeat I may be victorious? It is you more than all else that I desire."

Without warning his arms were around her, holding her fiercely to him, his face close to hers.

"Elza! With you, defeat would be victory. And with you—now—if you would but say the word—together we will surmount every obstacle.—"

He was kissing her, bending back her head, and his grip upon her shoulder was bruising the flesh. No longer Tarrano, Conqueror of the universe, just Tarrano the man. Terror surged within Elza's heart.

"Tarrano!"

"Elza dear—my Elza—"

"Tarrano!" She fought with him. "Tarrano, do you dare—I tell you—"

The frightened pleading of a woman at bay. And then abruptly he cast her off. His laugh was grim.

"What a fool I am! Tarrano the weakling!" He leaped from the couch and began pacing the room. "Tarrano the weakling! To what depths has Tarrano fallen!"

He stopped before her. "I ask your pardon, Lady Elza. This has been madness. Forget my words—all madness."

His tone was crisp. "Human weakness to which I did not realize I was so prone made me talk like a fool. Desire you above the conquest of the universe? Absurd! Lies that men whisper into women's ears! All lies!"

Was he telling the real truth now? Or was this a mood of recrimination? Bitterness that his love was scorned. Again his gaze held her, but in it now she could see nothing but a cruel inflexible purpose.

"Tarrano in defeat! That is impossible, Lady Elza. You will very shortly realize that, for I am going to show you how, single-handed, I can make it impossible.

Show you with your own eyes. It was my purpose in coming to waken you—my purpose, when your beauty led me into weakness incredible.... Get up, Lady Elza."

She stared. With folded arms he stood emotionless regarding her.

"Get up, I tell you. Put on those garments you wore when we arrived. We are going travelling again."

He stood waiting; and beneath his gaze she shrank back, drawing the fur rug over her.

A smile of contempt parted his lips. "You hesitate? You think I am still a weakling? You over-rate your beauty, Lady Elza.... Make haste, I command you. We must start very soon."

She summoned her voice. "Start? Where? What are you—"

"No questions, Lady Elza. Not now. Make haste—"

He jerked from her the fur covering, flung it across the room, and with the same gesture turned away impersonally. Trembling, she rose from the couch and donned the garments he had indicated, while he stood brooding by the window, gazing through its transparent pane at the glistening frozen city which was all that remained of his empire.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Thing in the Forest

"All in good time, Lady Elza, you will know where we are."

Alone, unnoticed, they had departed from the City of Ice on a small flying platform similar to the one they had used before. The night had passed; day, with a new warmth to the sun, came again. Flying low, with Tarrano in a grim, moody silence, and Elza staring downward.

The aural lights were overhead when at the last Tarrano brought the platform to rest. A thick, luxuriant forest. Huge trees with rope-like roots and heavy vines. Others with leaves like the ears of an elephant. And the ground hidden by almost impenetrable underbrush.

They had landed in a tiny glade beside a dank marsh of water, where ferns shoulder high were embanked. It was dark, the stars and the tints of the auroral lights were barely distinguishable through the mass of foliage overhead. Elza gazed around her fearsomely. The air was heavy, oppressive. Redolent with the perfume of wild flowers and the smell of mouldering, steaming soil.

"All in good time. Lady Elza," Tarrano repeated. "You will know where we are presently; we are closer to human habitation than you would think."

Elza's heart pounded. As they were descending she had noticed a glow of light in the sky ahead. As though by intuition now, she seemed to realize that they were not far from the Great City. Her thoughts leaped to me—Jac Hallen—there in

Maida's palace. Tarrano's grim, sinister purpose was as yet unknown to her. But she guessed that in it, danger impended for me—for all of us in the Great City.

"Jac! Danger! Jac! Danger!"

Her thoughts instinctively reiterated the two words uppermost in her mind. And I think that it was just about then when they awakened me.

Leaving the vehicle, Tarrano commanded Elza to follow him; and he began picking his way through the jungle. A light was in his hand; it penetrated but a short distance. A quivering beam of yellow light; then Elza saw that upon occasion, as Tarrano's finger slid a lever, the beam narrowed, intensified to a bright lavender. And now where it struck, the vegetation withered. Blackened, sometimes burst into tiny flame, and parted thus before them as they advanced.

The jungle was silent; yet, as Elza listened, beneath the crackle of the burning twigs she could hear the tiny myriad voices of insect life. Startled voices as the heat of Tarrano's beam struck them. Rustling leaves; breaking twigs; things scurrying and sliding away, unseen in the darkness.

Once or twice a crashing—some monster disturbed in his rest plunging away. Again, a slithering bulk of something, undulating its path through the thickets. All unseen. Save once. Looking upward, Elza caught a gleam of green eyes overhead. A triangle of three baleful spots of phosphorescent green. Her murmur of fright caused Tarrano to glance upward. His lavender, beam, grown suddenly larger, swung there with a hiss. Falling from above came a pink body. A bloated body, square, with squat, twisted legs; a thing larger than a man. A grotesque naked monstrosity almost in human form. A travesty—gruesome mockery of mankind. A face, three-eyed...

The thing lay writhing in the underbrush, mouthing, mumbling and then screaming—the shrill scream of death agony. And the horrible smell of burning flesh as Tarrano's light played upon it...

"Come away, Lady Elza. I'm sorry. I had hoped to avoid an affair such as this."

Sickened, shuddering, Elza clung close to Tarrano as he led her onward.

An hour or more; and now Elza could see in the distance the lights of the Great City.

"Jac! Danger! Jac! Danger!"

The idea of thought-transference had come to her. With all the power of her mind she was thinking her warning to me, praying that it might reach me.

"Single-handed, Lady Elza. You shall see now how, single-handed, I make impossible any attack upon Tarrano."

In her abstraction Elza had almost forgotten herself and Tarrano; his voice reached her—his voice grim and with a gloating, sinister triumph in it. He was bending to the ground. Elza saw that they had come to an open space—an emi-

nence rising above the forest. Underfoot was a stony soil; in places, bare black rock with an outcropping of red, like the cinnabar from which on Earth we melt the Heavy-metal.[23]

[Footnote 23: Quicksilver.]

Tarrano faced her. "Nature, my Lady Elza, is fair to my purpose. I knew I would find some such deposit as this." He turned his face to one side attentively, and darted his light—harmlessly yellow now—to where a lone tree showed its great leaves beginning to waver in a night breeze.

"Nature is with us! See there, my Elza! A wind is coming—a wind from us to—them!"

The breeze grew—a breeze blowing directly over the forest to where in the distance the lights of the Great City showed plainly. Tarrano added:

"I had thought to create the wind." He tapped his belt. "Create the wind to carry our onslaught. But you see, it is unnecessary. Nature is kind, and far more efficacious than our man-made devices."

"Jac! Danger!" She stood there in the breeze, watching Tarrano—his purpose as yet no more than guessed—praying that I might receive her warning.

Tarrano selected his spot—a tiny little cone of rock no bigger than his thumb. He beckoned Elza.

"Stand close, and watch. You shall see how from the merest spark, a conflagration may ensue."

The cylinder in his hand darted forth a needle-like shaft—a light of intense purple. It touched the tiny cone of rock, and he held it there.

"A moment. Be patient, my Elza."

The point of rock seemed presently to melt. Like a tiny volcano, at their feet, lava from it was flowing down. A little stream of melted rock, viscous, bubbling a trifle; red at the edges, white within, and with wisps of smoke curling up from it.

Elza stared with the fascination of horror, for now tiny tongues of flame were licking about. Blue tongues, licking the air, vanishing into wisps of black smoke.

Tarrano snapped off his ray. But the tongues of flame stayed alive. Spreading slowly, soundlessly, their heat now melting the ground.

A breath of the smoke touched Elza's face. Pungent, acrid. It stopped her breathing. She choked, coughed heavily to expel it.

"Come away, Lady Elza. Let us watch from a safer distance."

He led her from the hillock, up the wind to where at the edge of the forest they stood gazing.

The blue fire had spread over a distance of several feet. A sluggish, boiling, bubbling area of flame. Tongues now the height of a man. And from them, rolling upward, a heavy black cloud—deadly fumes thick, blacker than the night, spread-

ing out, welling forward over the forest toward the Great City slumbering in its falsely peaceful security.

At last Elza knew. Stood there, cold, shuddering, thinking with all the power of her mind and being:

"Death, Jac! Death to all the City! The black cloud of death!"

Oblivious to Tarrano she stood until at last the rocky eminence was one great mass of the surging blue fire. And the black cloud, compact as a thunder-head, rolled onward.

"You can see it coming! Death Jac! Death to all the City!"

A sudden madness descended upon Elza. She felt abruptly that her warning was futile, felt an overpowering desire to run. Run somewhere—anywhere, away from the lurid sight she was facing. Or run perhaps, to the Great City; to race with that black cloud of death; to run fast and far, and burst into our palace to warn us.

Tarrano himself lost in triumphant contemplation of what he had done, for the moment was heedless of Elza's presence. With white face upon which the blue glare had settled like a mask of death, Elza turned silently from him. Forgetful of that horrible thing they had encountered—others of its kind which might be lurking about—she turned silently and plunged into the black depths of the forest.

CHAPTER XXIX

A Woman's Scream

"The black Cloud of Death!"

We stood there at the casement of the palace, gazing with a growing terror at the visible evidence of the tragedy which threatened. A black cloud off there in the distance, spreading out, rolling inexorably toward us. And then came the wind, and with it a breath of the black monster—a choking, horrible suggestion of the death rolling already over the city.

We must have been fascinated at the casement for some considerable time. Elza's thought messages had ceased. Abruptly I came to myself.

"The Black Cloud of Death!" I turned to Georg and Maida. "Alarm the city! Arouse them all! Alarm—"

Maida's face was white: she flung off Georg's arm which had been protectingly around her. "The siren—"

Terrible moments, those that followed. Confusion; panic; death!

The public siren in the tower by the lagoon entrance shrilled its warning. The danger lights blazed out. The city came to life. Lights sprang up everywhere. People—with the daze of sleep still upon them—appeared at the casements; on the roof-tops; on the canal steps they appeared, fumbling with their boats. Panic!

A pandemonium. Aircraft, such as could so hastily be mustered, swept over-

head. A glare of lights everywhere. The shrill voice of the siren stilled, to make audible the broadcast warnings—stentorian tones screaming: "The Black Cloud of Death! Escape from the city! Escape to Industriana!"

Warning, advice, command! But over it all, the breath of the black cloud now lay heavy. The lights were dimmed by it. Everywhere—to every deepest recess of the city—to every inner room where to escape it many had fled—its deadly choking breath was penetrating.

Within the palace was turmoil. We had an air-vehicle on a landing-stage nearby; but Georg and Maida would not leave at once. Rulers of the Central State, as a Director might stick to his crumbling Tower, they stayed now in the Great City. Encouraging the people. Maida's voice, futilely attempting to broadcast over the uproar. Georg commanding the official air-vessels to load with refugees; himself struggling to direct the jam of boats toward the embarking stages.

We were in the instrument room of the palace. The air was pale-blue, though I had closed every casement. Ourselves, choking already; then gasping; and with no time or thought to procure a mask. The chemical room, from whence we might have secured apparatus to purify our air, had been abandoned before we thought to seek it out. I dashed into it, my breath held. Its casements were open; its air thick-blue with the fumes; its staff long since fled. I ran back to Georg and Maida, gasping, my lungs on fire, my head roaring.

"No use! Abandoned!"

The department of weather control where—had we been forewarned—we might have found means to divert the wind by another of our own creation—was deserted by its staff at the first alarm.

"No use! Georg—Maida—let us go!"

The mirrors all about us in the instrument room were going dark; the horrible scenes of death throughout the city which they pictured were vanishing. The public lights were going out; the broadcast voices were ceasing.

The city now was out of control. But still the lagoon outside was packed with boats—overloaded boats.... Screams of terror, choked into silence ... boats with frenzied occupants leaping into the water to find a quicker, happier death ... a woman with a babe in her arms on a housetop across the lagoon—the infant already dead; the crazed mother flinging it down into the water, herself following with a long, gasping scream...

At last Georg pulled at me—no longer could we speak—pulled at me, and with Maida between us, we fled. The air outside was worse. In the dimness, our landing stage seemed belans away. The flagged area between us and the stage—a space of square-cut metal flagging, bordering the lagoon—was littered with bodies. Dead—or dying. People even now staggering from landed boats—staggering blindly, stumbling over bodies, falling and lying always where they had

fallen.

With our own senses fading, we groped our way forward. Soon we were separated. I saw Maida fall and Georg pick her up, but I was powerless to reach them.

The landing stage seemed so far away. The dead and dying beneath my feet obstructed me as I staggered over them. A woman, reeling toward me, flung her arms about my neck with an iron grip of despair. I stared into her face, purple almost with its congested blood, her mouth gaping, her blood-shot eyes bulging; and even with the terror distorting them, I saw beneath it their look of despairing appeal...

Her arms clinging to me desperately; but with a curse I flung her to the ground and reeled onward.

Without knowing it, I had come to the brink of the water's edge. The flagging seemed to drop away. I fell. Dimly I heard the splash as I struck the water; and felt a grateful cooling sense as it closed over me.

I am a strong, instinctive swimmer. I did not breathe, and when I rose to the surface, the single swift breath I took was purer than any I had had for half an hour past. My head cleared a little; swimming instinctively, and with cautious breaths, I found that I was able to go on.

I know now that by some vagary of chance—of fate if you will—I had struck a surface area where breathable air still remained. I swam, striving to plan, to think where I might be swimming. Yet it was all a phantasmagoria, with only the strength of my muscles and the instinct to preserve my life remaining to direct me. Swimming endlessly ... swimming ... taking a half-gasp of breath ... swimming ... trying to think ... or dreaming ... was it all a dream?...

When I came to myself I was lying upon a bank of ferns in the outskirts of the city. It was still night; the black cloud of death had passed on; the air was pure. Like a man for days bereft of water, I lay and drank in the air, pure at last, as the Almighty distils it for us.

Bodies were lying around me on the bank. A dark, silent house stood nearby; and a deserted boat. All darkness and silence—the brooding silence of death. I was still dazed. Maida—Georg; they seemed like people in a dream long faded. Industriana! They were going to the Rhaal City of Industriana. I had been trying to get there. I must get there now—join them. I climbed to my feet; the edge of a forest was nearby and with wavering steps I started toward it.

Looking back on it now I realize that I was even then half crazed. In a daze I must have stumbled through the forest for hours. Unreasoning, with only that one idea—to get to Industriana; and in the background of my consciousness the vague belief that Elza would be there to greet me. Into the depths of the untrammeled forest with unguided steps I wandered.

At last I found myself wondering if the dawn were coming; the tri-night hour

was long since passed; the auroral lights as I could sometimes see them through the tangle of vegetation overhead, were low in the sky. Insects—and sometimes larger beings—leaped and slithered unseen before my advance. But I did not heed them. Eyes may have peered at me as I stumbled through the blackness of the undergrowth; but if they did, I did not notice them.

And then at last I was brought abruptly to full rationality and consciousness. Stumbling through a tangle of low growth—a black thicket which tore at my garments and scratched my flesh—I was transfixed by a woman's scream. It came through the darkness from near at hand. A crashing of the underbrush, and a woman's scream of terror. It stopped my breath, turned me cold.

Elza!

CHAPTER XXX

The Monster

I stood frozen with horror; but as my brain cleared—awake at last to full rationality and consciousness—beneath the horror came a surging joy of the knowledge that at last Elza was near me. The scream was repeated; inactive no longer, I dashed the thicket branches apart with my arms and plunged forward through the darkness.

Ahead of me the thickets opened into a sort of clearing. I saw the sky, the stars—paling stars with the first flush of dawn overpowering them. I stood at the edge of an open space in the dim, flat-grey illumination of morning twilight.

Elza! She was there, standing near a huge isolated tree; Elza, pale, trembling, a hand pressed against her mouth in terror; disheveled, her garments dirty and torn with her wanderings through the forest.

A swift glimpse as momentarily I paused; a second or two only, but the scene was impressed upon my brain as actinic light upon a photo-screen. Close by Elza, partially behind her, I saw something small, no taller than Elza's waist. A naked thing of sleek, glistening skin. The monstrosity of a human child; a bulging head, wavering upon a neck incapable of supporting it; a thick round body; twisted, misshapen limbs. A face ... human? It made my gorge rise with its gruesome suggestion of humanity. Nostrils—no nose; a mouth, lipless, but red like a curved gash with upturned corners to make the travesty of a grin; a triangle of watery eyes, goggling. Senselessly, it stood watching Elza with a dull, vacant curiosity. Not human, this thing! Yet monstrously repulsive in its hideous suggestion of an idiot child.

Elza was not facing it; my gaze instinctively followed hers to the tree. Crowning horror! The adult of this thing upon the ground hung swaying by a thick hand and arm from a low limb; hung, then dropped. Growling, mouthing as though it would try and form human words of menace, it picked itself up and shambled

toward Elza.

I leaped for them. Elza seemed too terrified to run. The thing reached her, towered over her; seized her in its arms. She screamed—the agony of revolt and terror; but over her voice rose my own shout of rage, and abruptly the thing dropped her and turned to confront me. Snarling, glaring with its three hideous blood-shot eyes; waving its thick, bent arms.

I had no weapons save those with which nature had endowed me. The regret of that came as a fleeting thought; and then I crashed into the thing; my fist, passing its awkward guard, struck it full in the face. I sickened. Even in the heat of combat a nausea swept me. For no solid flesh and bone met my blow, like the shell of an egg, my fist crashed into and through its face.

Warm, sticky moisture ... a stench ...

The thing had toppled backward, with me sprawling upon its bloated bulk. It struggled, writhed ... Its arms gripped me, its huge fingers clutched my throat ... I caught a glimpse of its smashed face ... so close, I turned away ... a face of yellow-white pulp ...

My fist cracked and sank into its chest. I pounded, smashed; broke the shell of its distended body ... noisome ... the revulsion, the nausea of it all but overcame me.

At last the thing lay still; and from the wet, sticky foulness of it I rose and stood shuddering. Elza lay on the ground; but she had risen upon one elbow and I saw that she was unharmed save for the shock of terror through which she had passed—a mitigated shock with the knowledge now that I was with her, and that I too was uninjured.

The infant thing had vanished. I hastened forward.

"Elza! Elza, dear—"

Joy lighted her face.

"Jac!"

I would have lifted her up; but the consciousness of my own foulness—the yellow-white slime streaked with red which smeared my arms, splattered my clothing—gave me pause. In the growing light, beyond the clearing, I caught the silver sheen of water. Without a word I ran for it; a shimmering pool the existence of which no doubt had drawn these grewsome beings of the forest into its vicinity. To the cleansing water I ran, plunged in, purged myself of that horrible foulness which human senses could not endure.

When I returned, Elza was upon her feet. Recovered at last she flung herself into my arms. Impulsive; seeking protection as she clung to me; fear; the let-down of overwrought nerves as she stood and clung and sobbed upon my shoulder.

It was all of that; but oh! it was more than that as well. My Elza, raising her tear-

stained face and kissing me. Murmuring, "Jac, I love you!" Murmuring her love: "Jac dear, you're safe! I've wanted so long to be with you again—I've been so frightened—so frightened—"

Giving me back my kisses unreserved; holding me with eager arms ... Tarrano? The memory of him came to me. How foolish my fears, my jealousy! That man of genius ... conqueror of worlds ...

But my Elza loved me!...

CHAPTER XXXI

Industriana

It must have been two days later when at last we were rescued by the Rhaal patrol and taken to Industriana. Back there in the forest I had suddenly remembered that the mate to the thing I had killed would doubtless be lurking in the vicinity. We fled. Subsisting on what food of the wilds we could find, at last we were picked up and taken to the City of Work.

The Great City had been destroyed. Wanton capital of the Central State, we learned now that it lay dead. To outward aspect, unharmed. Fair, serene, alluring as ever it lay there on its shimmering waters; but the life within it, was dead. Refugees—a quarter perhaps of the inhabitants—had escaped; hourly the search patrols were picking them up, bringing them to Industriana. Rescue parties were searching the city, to find any who might still be alive.

And out in the forest lay a great pile of ashes, still exhaling a thin wisp of its deadly breath—where Tarrano had created the Black Cloud; lost his captive Elza, but doubtless had escaped himself back to his City of Ice.

We found Georg and Maida safe at Industriana. Marvelous city! Elza had never seen it before. She sat gazing breathless as from the air on the patrol vessel, we approached it.

The land of this region was a black, rocky soil upon which vegetation would not grow. A rolling land, grimly black, metallic; with outcroppings of ore, red and white and with occasional patches of thin white sand whereon a prickly blue grass struggled for life.

Rolling hills; and then places where nature had upheaved into a turmoil. Huge naked black crags; buttes; hills with precipitous black sides of sleek metal; narrow canyons with tumultuous water flowing through them.

In such a place stood Industriana. The City of Work! Set in an area where nature lay scarred, twisted in convulsion, its buildings clung to every conceivable slope and in every position. Many-storied buildings—residences and factories indiscriminately intermingled. All built in sober, solid rectangles of the forbidding black stone.

A long steep slope from an excavated quarry deep in the ground, ran straight up to a commanding hilltop—the slope set with an orderly array of buildings clinging to it in terraces. Buildings huge, or tiny huts; all anchored in the rear to the ground, and set upon metal girders in the front. Bisecting the slope was a vertical street—a broad escalator of moving steps, one half going upward, the other down. Beside it, a series of other escalators for the traffic of moving merchandise.

Cross streets on the hill were spider bridges, clinging with thin, stiff legs. And at the summit of the hill stood a tremendous funnel belching flame and smoke into the sky.

To one side of the hill lay a bowl-like depression with a single squat building in its center—a low building of many funnels; and about it the black yawning mouths of shafts down into the ground—mines vomiting ore, broken chunks of the metallic rock coming up as though by the invisible magic of magnetism, hunting through the air in an arc to fall with a clatter into great bins above the smelter.

In another place, at the bottom of a canyon roared a surging torrent of river. A harnessed river; plunging into turbines; emerging to tumble over a cascade, its every drop caught by turning buckets spilled again at the bottom. Water pursuing its surging course downward, its power used again and again. The canyon dry at one place near the lower edge of the city, the water all electrified, resolved into piped hydrogen and oxygen. Like a tremendous clock ticking, the water, momentarily dammed back, was released in a torrent to the electrolysis vats. The hissing gases, under tremendous pressure, raised up the heavy-weighted tops of two expanding tanks. Another tick of this giant clock—the gases released, were merged again to water. The tops of the tanks lowered, each in turn, one coming down as the other went up—hundreds of tons of weight—their slow downward pull geared to scores of whirling wheels—the power shifted to dynamos scattered throughout the city.

It was the twilight of nightfall when we arrived over Industriana. A thousand funnels and chimneys belched their flame and smoke—the flame tinting the sky with a lurid yellow-green glare, the smoke hanging like a dim blue gauze through which everything seemed unreal, infernal.

From the city rose a roar—the myriad sounds of industry mingled by the magic of distance. And as we got closer, the roar resolved into its component parts; the grinding of gears; clicking of belts and chains; whirring of dynamos and motors; shrill electrical screams; the clattering of falling ore; clanking of swiftly moving merchandise, bound in metal, magnetized to monorail cars shifting it to warehouses on the nearby hills. And over it all flashed the brilliant signal lights of the merchandise traffic directors whose stentorian electrical voices broadcasting commands sounded above the city's noises.

An inferno of activity. A seeming confusion; yet the aspect of confusion was a

fallacy, for beneath it lay a precision—an orderly precision as calm and exact as the mind of the Director of a Signal Tower counting off the split seconds of his beams.

An orderly precision—the brain of one man guiding and dominating everything; at his desk alone for long hours throughout the days and nights. A quiet, grey-haired gentleman; unhurried, unharassed, seemingly almost inactive; always seated at his empty desk smoking endless arrant-cylinders. The dominating business brain of Industriana.

CHAPTER XXXII

Departure

Georg and Maida were very busy in Industriana; and now Elza and I were admitted to their activities—Elza and I, with our new-found love and happiness neglected for the greater thing, the welfare of the nation upon which hinged the very safety of Venus itself; and Mars; and our own fair Earth.

Industriana, greatest commercial and manufacturing center of Venus, had been given over momentarily to the preparations for war. The Rhaals had at last turned from industry to the conquest of Tarrano. Preparations were almost completed; our armies were to start within a very few times of sleep.

I had had no experience in warfare; but the history of our Earth had told me much of it. The enlisting and training of huge armies of men; arming them; artillery; naval and air forces; commissary and supplies; a gigantic business organization to equip, move and maintain millions of fighting men.

Ancient warfare! This—our modern way—was indeed dissimilar. It was, from most aspects, simplicity itself. We had no need of men in great numbers. I found something like a single thousand of men being organized and trained. And equipped with weapons to outward aspects comparatively simple.

On all the three worlds the age of explosives of the sort history records, was long since passed. Electronic weapons—all basically the same. And I found now that it was the power for them, developed, transformed into its various characteristics and stored for individual transportation and use, which was mainly engrossing Industriana.

I had opportunity, that first night, of meeting Geno-Rhaalton—the present head of that famous Rhaalton line, for generations hereditary leaders of their race.

We found him, this Geno-Rhaalton, in a secluded, somber little office of black metallic walls, grey hangings and rug, a block of carved stone his desk, and a few of the stiff-backed stone chairs, each with its single prim cushion.

The office was beyond sight and sound of the busy city. His desk was empty, save for the array of apparatus around its edges—the clicking tabulators which

recorded, sorted, analyzed and summarized for him every minute detail with which the city was engaged.

Machines of business detail. We had them, of course, in the Inter-Allied offices of Greater New York. I have seen our Divisional Director voice into a mouthpiece the demand for some statistical summary computed up to five minutes before, and covering his entire Atlantic Division. He would have it, recorded in cold print before him, within a moment.

Yet, compared to the Rhaalton efficiency, our own methods seemed antiquated indeed. This man was in touch with every transpiring detail simultaneously; yet not confused by them, for every detail was also combined into a whole—to be examined for itself if he wished. Visually as well, the entire city lay before his gaze—the walls of the office were lined with rows and tiers of small mirrors; receivers and mouthpieces connected him with everything. Sights, sounds, and even smells of the various factories were available to him—smells when his sense of smell might be necessary for the testing of some elusive gas.

Without moving his physical body his presence was in effect transported wherever throughout the city he wished to be. A man of tremendous concentration, to handle but one thing at a time; with all the power of his brain to give instant decision, and then to forget it utterly.

I found him a rather small man; smooth-shaven; grey-haired; a grave face and demeanor, with dark eyes solemn with thought, yet twinkling often when he spoke. A man of flabby muscles and gentle voice; seemingly unforceful, and with a personality likable, but hardly dominating.

Instinctively I found myself comparing him to Tarrano. Tarrano's strong, wiry body. The flash of his eye; his inscrutability, always suggesting menace; the power, the genius of his personality—the force radiating from him which no one could mistake. His intellectual power—his concentration—certainly the equal of this little leader of the Rhaals.

Tarrano the Conqueror! Tarrano—man of destiny—risen from nothing and by the sheer genius of his will throwing three worlds into chaos, at one stage combining two worlds into his self-created Empire; and menacing the third. Surely Tarrano was a greater man than this Rhaalton. I knew it; much as I hated Tarrano I was forced to admit it.

Yet as I stood there acknowledging the soft-spoken greeting of Rhaalton, I had the swift premonition that Tarrano was going down into defeat. And that this little man, without moving from his desk or raising his voice, would be the main factor in bringing it about.

And I wondered why such a thing could be. I know why now. Tarrano, with all his genius, lacked just one quality which this little man had in abundance. The milk of human kindness—humanity—a radiating force the essence of which para-

doxically was the unforceful gentleness of him. The Almighty—as we each of us in our hearts must envisage our God—is just, but gentle, humane in His justness. And with all the genius in the universe—the war-like power—the weapons—the cohorts—all the wonderful armament of war—you cannot transgress the Will of the Almighty. Against all human logic of what should be victory—you will meet defeat....

The thoughts fled through my mind and vanished into the realities of the present. Rhaalton was saying:

"We will be ready within another time of sleep. Jac Hallen, you wish, I suppose, to go out with our forces?"

"Oh yes," I said.

He smiled. "The eagerness of youth for danger! And yet is very necessary—very laudable—"

He passed a hand across his forehead with a weary gesture—a gesture which seemed to me despondent. Could this be our vaunted leader? My heart sank.

He added abruptly: "We shall conquer this Tarrano—but at what cost!" His smile was wistful. "We must choose the lesser evil."

Still gently, almost sorrowfully, but with a directness and clarity of thought which amazed me, he plunged into a detailed account of what Georg was to do in command of our forces. My own part in it, already planned by him in detail. Maida's part. Elza's. The division of Rhaal maidens.

Girlhood in war! It seemed very strange. Yet the Rhaal maidens were going as a matter of course, since there were some activities for which they were more fitted than the men. With all the Rhaal maidens going, Elza and Maida would not stay behind. And though Maida—a wife—was objected to by Rhaalton, he had yielded finally to her pleading.

I will not now detail our plans or our armament. We had, in general, one thousand unmarried men, in five divisions of two hundred each. They were largely Rhaals, with the few Earth men previously sent us; fifty perhaps of the most loyal slaans; and a scattering of the other races of the Venus Central State. A few—thirty perhaps—of the Little People of Mars. In addition, another hundred men, individually in charge of the larger apparatus and the vehicles. And the division of two hundred girls.

Our journey to the Cold Country was to be made on flying platforms and vehicles of various sizes; some large to carry fifty passengers or more; others so small that only one person could be carried. These latter, the girls were to use. I call them platforms. In this size they were not, literally speaking, much more than the transporting mechanism fastened to the girl's waist.

There were also heavier vehicles carrying the larger apparatus; and several of fairly large size with food, clothing, housing equipment—supplies of all kinds

for our maintenance abroad. A dozen vehicles also carrying huge skeleton towers, encircled at the top with ray projectors. A vehicle with a single room—an instrument room fully equipped by means of which Geno-Rhaalton at his desk would be in contact with our every move. And largest vehicle of all—in aspect a solid, squat affair almost of a size for inter-planetary travel—our power plant.

We started at dawn of the second morning after my own arrival in Industriana. The girls were to travel to the borders of the Cold Country on the larger vehicles, but they wished to start flying individually for the first few helans of the journey for practice. Georg, Maida, Elza and I were to travel in the instrument room.

We massed upon a broad hilltop near the city. In the grey twilight of dawn with a flush of pink in the sky where the sun in a few moments would rise, I stood in the outer doorway of the instrument vehicle. Around me was the confusion of departure. Eager young men; laughing girls, flushed with excitement. The gayety of youth going to war! Young as I was myself, I was struck with the drama, the pathos of it. What would the home-coming be?

Georg, Maida and Elza were with me. Geno-Rhaalton stepped up to us. Bareheaded. A solemn little man, heavy-hearted.

"Good-by," he said simply. "I know you will do your best."

"Jac! Look there!"

I followed Elza's startled gesture to the soft, white clouds which were massed in the sky above us. By what magic of science the thing was accomplished, I know not; but up there in the clouds a gigantic image of Tarrano was materializing! His head and shoulders. Arms folded; his face with a sardonic smile leering down at us! Lips moving. And out of the air about us came his audible, broadcasting words.

"Do your best, my friends!" Ironic mockery! "Coming to conquer Tarrano? Hasten! You are keeping Tarrano waiting most impatiently!"

The giant voice died away into silence; the huge image melted into the clouds and vanished.

Rhaalton looked at us again, expressionless. "Good-by," he repeated. "Do your best."

He turned away abruptly. And then as he walked with a despondent droop, I saw his shoulders suddenly straighten. He flung a hand into the air. The signal to start! From a tower in Industriana a puff of violet light shot up to magnify the signal.

The girls, all in their places, rose into the air. Draperies fluttering, like graceful birds they rose, circled over us in an arc; and then in a long, single line, with officers apart to one side marking them in squads of twenty, they sped into the dimness of distance.

The tower vehicles now were rising. Then the larger platform; the power plant,

like a floating building sailing majestically up.

"Come, Jac."

Elza and Maida were inside the instrument room gazing through one of its windows; and Georg drew me within, closing the transparent door after us. Through the windows I could see the line of vehicles following after the girls. Then our instrument room rose quietly, soundlessly. The ground dropped slowly away, then faster; and as we swung about I saw the hilltop beneath us. Its sides were lined with waving spectators; stricken momentarily with awe at the apparition of Tarrano, they had already forgotten it; from every vantage point of Industriana they were frantically waving.

But the hilltop was empty, save for one lone figure—Geno-Rhaalton standing sorrowfully gazing after us.

CHAPTER XXXIII

First Assault

Our spies had informed us that of recent weeks there had arisen about the City of Ice a huge wall behind which Tarrano would make his stand. It was our plan to approach within range of this and establish our power plant as a base from which to direct our offensive. The trip from the Great City was not long. After a few helans our girls ceased flying individually and boarded their appointed vehicles.

In a long single line, armament platforms, the towers, our instrument room, with the power plant bringing up the rear, we sailed forward. There were in our instrument vehicle, Maida, Georg, Elza and myself, the vehicle manned by two pilots and two mechanicians—a slaan, a Mars man, and two Earth men. We were in constant communication with Geno-Rhaalton. And though he enjoined upon us all the necessity for sleeping or resting during the trip, himself sat alert at his desk, unrelaxing. The little mirror on our table showed him sitting there, watching every move we made.

We laid down to rest, but sleep was impossible. Through the panelled transparent floor, I watched the country changing as we advanced; vegetation dwindling; the soil changing to rocky barrenness at the border of the Cold Country. And then the snow-plains, the mute frozen rivers of ice, the mountains.

In the twilight of the Cold Country autumn, we sailed up to the mountains and approached to the City of Ice. Alert, all of us now, as at an altitude of a few thousand feet we circled about, marking time until the power plant had selected its base and landed to make ready for the battle.

Throughout the trip we had expected—had anticipated the possibility—of a surprise attack by Tarrano; an ambush in the open air, perhaps by some means strange to us. But the vision magnifiers, the microphones—encompassing every

known range of sight and sound—showed us nothing. Especially at the mountains we had thought to meet opposition. But at first none came. It seemed somehow ominous, this lack of action from Tarrano; and when the leader of our line—a tower vehicle—rose sharply to scale the jagged peaks of the Divide, the flare of a hostile electronic bomb rising came almost as a relief. From the instrument room—forewarned an instant by the hiss of our microphones—I saw the bomb start upward. Slowly as a rocket it mounted—a blurred ball of glowing violet light, quite plain in the dim twilight. I knew that the tower platform at which it was directed would have time to throw out its insulation; I knew that the insulation would doubtless be effective—yet my heart leaped nevertheless. At my hand was a projector; but in those few seconds the tower just in advance of us in the line was quicker. Its ray darted at the violet ball; the soundless explosion threw a wave of sparks about the menaced tower, like a puff—a pricked bubble of soap-film—the violet ball was dissipated. But I saw the menaced tower rock a trifle from the shock.

Geno-Rhaalton's face in the mirror beside me was very solemn. I heard him murmuring something to the other towers, saw their light flash downward, searching the mountain defiles. And as I watched that little image of Rhaalton, I chanced to notice a mirror on Rhaalton's desk. Rhaalton himself was looking at it—a mirror which had been dark, but which now flashed on. An outlaw circuit! The mirror imaged the face of Tarrano. Tarrano grinning ironically!

CHAPTER XXXIV

Invisible Assailants

We did not locate the source of the bomb, and no others rose to assail us. The mountain defiles, so far as our lights could illuminate them, seemed deserted. We passed over the Divide, and on the plateau beyond, we landed. A region of rolling country beneath its snow and ice. The mountains came down sharply to the inner plain—a crescent of mountain range stretching off into the dimness of distance, half encircling this white plateau in the center of which stood the City of Ice. We could just see it at the horizon, the glittering spires of its Ice Palace.

Around the city, completely enveloping it, was a thick circular wall of ice twenty times the height of a man. We were too far away to see it plainly—a turreted wall doubtless armed with projectors throughout its circular length. Our finders would not show it, for it was insulated against them. It stood there grey-white, bleak and apparently deserted.

Georg said: "It's the man's accursed inactivity! Is he going to do nothing?... Our power plant has landed, Jac—there in the foothills—see it drop?" A call from Rhaalton took his attention.

We landed our entire force in the foothills of the mountains. The power plant was there; it looked like a squat industrial building set upon a ledge of ice—a

shining cliff-face behind it, a precipice in front. At the foot of the precipice our other vehicles were clustered.

We were there throughout three entire times of sleep, hours strangely the same in that unaltered polar twilight. During them, with the tower platforms set in a ring about us to make an armed camp, we unloaded our apparatus, erected our power controls, prepared the individual circuits, making ready for our offensive. And still—though we, were alert for it—no move from Tarrano.

They were hours during which, with my lack of technical knowledge, I found myself often with nothing to do. Our camp was bustling with activity, but among the now idle girls and many of the young men, there was an air of gayety. They laughed, shouted, played games amid the rocks from which we had long since melted the snow. Once, in what would have been early evening had not the Sun in these latitudes held level like a burned-out ball near the horizon, Elza and I wandered from the camp to climb the cliffs nearby.

Beyond the circle of the camp's heat, the deadly cold of the region assailed us. We had not wished to equip with the individual heating, which for battle would leave us free of heavy garments; instead we swathed ourselves in furs, with the exercise of climbing to aid us in keeping warm.

It was wonderful to be again alone with Elza. Even with what was impending we were young enough to put it momentarily from our minds. Like young lovers clandestinely stealing away to a tryst, we left the camp and hand in hand, climbed up amid the crags. A few hundred feet to one side of the power house, and about the same distance above it, we sat down at last to rest.

The scene from here was picturesque in the extreme. Across the flat, shadowless snowy plain was the wall of ice with the city behind it. All in the far distance, this city wherein our enemy was entrenched; and there were no lights, no movement that we could see. In that drab twilight, it seemed almost unreal.

The plain too, was empty. A few palpably deserted huts, nothing else. Beneath us, snugly anchored there on the ledge, was our power house. No unreality here. Its aerials were mounted; its external dynamos were visibly revolving; from its windows blue shafts of light slanted out; and from it rose the low hum of active power.

Below it, spread over the slightly sloping area of foothill beneath us, lay our encampment. A ring of our tower vehicles, with their projectors mounted and ready, their colored search-beams slowly sweeping the white plain and the dead grey sky. Within their ring, the camp itself. Lighted by the blue-white tubes set upon quadrupeds at intervals; heated by strings of red-glowing wire and the red wire-balls used on Venus. The snow and ice on the ground within the camp had melted, exposing the naked rock.

A scene of blue and red lights and shifting shadows; bustling with activity—

figures, tiny from this height, hurrying about. The sounds from it rose to us; the low hum and snap of the weapons being tested; the shouted commands; and sometimes, mingled with it, the laughing shout of a light-hearted girl.

Elza clung close to me. "Everything will be ready soon."

I nodded. "They're going to mount a ray up here on the cliff. Grolier was telling me, for permanent protection—to stay here with the power house when we go out to the attack."

Silent with her thoughts she did not answer me. Sidewise, I regarded her solemn little face encased in its hood of fur. And then clumsily, for our furs were heavy and awkward, I put my arm about her.

"I love you, Elza. It's worth a great deal to be here alone with you."

"Jac, what will he do?" Her gaze was to the far-off City of Ice. "It seems so—so sinister, Jac, this silence from him. This inactivity. It is not like him to be inactive."

"He's there," I said. "Rolltar the Mars man—boastful fellow, blow-hard—he was telling some of us that in his opinion Tarrano had already run away."

"Never!" she exclaimed. "This is his last stand. He'll make it here—defeat us here—"

"Elza!"

She glanced momentarily at me, smiled a queer smile, and then gazed once more over the distant plain. "I do not mean I think he'll defeat us, Jac. I mean, that is his reasoning—make his last stand here—"

"He hasn't run away," I repeated. "I told Rolltar so. We got an outlaw connection into the Ice Palace today. For a moment only, and then it was discovered and broken off. But we had the image for a moment—it chanced to show Tarrano himself. But he's isolated now. Bretan said his isolation power—around the Ice Palace and the wall anyway—is greater than any image-ray we can send against it."

My heart leaped suddenly, for I saw Elza's eyes widen, fear spring to her face; heard the sharp intake of her breath, and felt her hand grip my arm.

"Jac! There's something wrong! See there? And you hear it?"

From the instrument room I heard a vague drumming. A hiss, and then a drumming growing louder. It was not a new sound, for now I remembered I had been conscious of it for several moments past. Our encampment was awake to it! A confusion down there; people running about; a figure dashing wildly into the instrument room. And the aerials on the power house began to snap viciously.

"Jac! What is it?"

"I don't know. See there, Elza? The sub-ray lights!"

The search-beams from our towers were inordinately active. Sweeping the empty snow-plain and the empty sky. Empty? To my fevered imagination they were peopled with enemies. And then one of the towers flashed on a sub-ray—

the dull infra-red for envisaging the slow rays below the power of human sight. And another tower with its faint purple beam was using the ultra-violet.

"That drumming, Elza! That's a microphone—the big one they just erected near the instrument room. There's something coming! That's the magnified sound of some distant rush of air. Very faint sound, but they must have heard it on the ear-phones long ago. That microphone must have just been connected—"

Something coming? We could see nothing.

"Let's go down, Jac! We must get back—"

"I've got infra-red glasses—" I fumbled beneath my furs. But I did not have them.

"Jac—"

"Wait, Elza."

My glasses would have been useless, for the sub and ultra beams from the towers were disclosing nothing. I could tell that by the hasty searching sweeps they made. And then from the big Wilton tower, the newly connected Zed-ray flashed on, I could hear the load of it in the deepened, throaty hum from the power house. Its dirty brown beam sprayed out over the plain; then swung to the sky, caught something, hung motionless, narrowed into great intensity. The powerful Zed-ray, capturing the visibility of dense solids only.[24]

[Footnote 24: Similar doubtless to our present-day X-ray.]

There was something up there in the sky! The Zed-ray met resistance; we could see the sparks, and hear the snap of them coming like a roar from the microphone above the drumming. Met the resistance and conquered it; gradually the snapping roar died away.

"Jac! I see something! Something there—don't you see it?"

A luminous blur became visible in the nearer sky—moving blobs of silver luminosity in the mud-brown light of the Zed-ray. A hundred or more moving silver blobs. They were taking form. The silvery phosphorescent look faded, became grey-white. Took definite shape. Waving arms and legs! Bones bereft of flesh. Human skeletons! Limbs waving rhythmically. Bony arms, with fingers clutching metal weapons. Assailants coming at us through the air, stripped by the Zed-ray of clothing, skin, flesh, organs, to the naked bone. Skeletons with skulls of empty eye-sockets and set jaw-bones to make the travesty of human faces grim with menace!

CHAPTER XXXV

Attack on the Power House

Stricken with surprise and awe, Elza and I sat there motionless. Our encampment was in a turmoil of confusion—chaos, out of which very soon order came.

The skeleton figures in the air—I saw now that there were nearer two hundred than one hundred—were perhaps two thousand feet away, and at an altitude of about the cliff-ledge where Elza and I were sitting.

They swept forward, bathed in the Zed-ray with all our other search-beams darkened to give it full sway. Momentarily I saw them clearer; metallic cylinders in bony fingers, and a metal mechanism of flight encasing, yet not touching the ribs.

"Jac! Why don't our rays—"

As though to answer Elza's unfinished question, one of our towers turned a disintegrating ray upon them. A narrow pencil-point of light, barely visible in this flat daylight. It swung up into our Zed-ray, searched and clung to one of the skeleton figures. Had it penetrated, the man would have been dissipated like a puff of vapor. But it did not; and then I knew that for that distance at least, this enemy's isolation power—individual barrage—was too great.

Yet the assailed figure wavered! Our amplifier gave out his shout—half fear, half admonition. The line of skeletons swung upward. Came on, but mounted so that I saw that they were making for the summit of the cliff above us—above our power house.

Their defense—invisibility, and a mere isolation barrage so that we could not harm them with our tower rays while they kept beyond range. But what was their means of attack? Why would Tarrano....

"The power house," Elza answered; and I realized then that she had read my thoughts. The power house, if they could demolish it....

Our thoughts, questions and answers unspoken, flew fast; but the drama before us unfolded faster. With the knowledge that we could see them, these invaders cast aside a portion of their equipment to give them greater freedom. We could see the metal portions of the trappings falling like plummets. The skeleton images faded; and then as our tower withdrew the Zed-ray and our search-beams picked them up, we saw our enemies as they really were. Men clothed in a casing of cylindrical garments with the flying mechanisms strapped to their chests; some with visors and headpieces, nearly all with small weapons in their hands.

Keeping well away, they continued to mount. They were striving for the pinnacle of cliff-tops above us; but as our rays darted at them they halted, wavered; and now when nearly above the camp, they began mounting straight up.

"Jac! Look there!"

One of our tower vehicles was preparing to rise. Its ray, following the search-beams upward, was aimed at the invaders, but they were beyond its effective range. Their weapons of attack? I knew now.

"Suicides!"

Whether Elza said it, or merely thought it I do not know. One of the figures came down as though falling. A few seconds only; but though our search-beam showed it, the smaller rays for those seconds missed it. Down—until no more than five hundred feet above us it checked its fall. A giant of a man; and with his hand cylinder—in range now—he shot a bolt at our power house. It struck; I could see the flash, saw an aerial shatter before the charge went harmlessly into the body of the building. Then one of our rays caught the man; his figure crumpled; the shower of sparks as his barrage was broken, exploded like a tiny bursting bomb; and as the sparks died, there was nothing where the man had been.

A suicide; but one of our aerials was shattered. And then others came down—not many, for it was grim business and the courage of them must have failed at the last. Falling bodies; tiny bolts striking the power house; the sparks—then empty air where living men had been.

Our tower left the ground. Some of our men, with small flying platforms strapped to them, were crowding its top. Its beams preceded it—but I saw the beams breaking intermittently as the bolts struck the power house. The invaders wavered with indecision. Some of them came down to voluntary death; others strove for the cliff-top; some took flight. Our tower swept into them; one of them, injured but not annihilated, fell with a crash into the encampment.

Above Elza and me was a maze of flashing beams; futile bolts; the puffs of myriad sparks. A bolt seemed to strike quite near where we were sitting; I drew Elza back and we crouched in the hollow of a rock. A body came hurtling down, crashed to the cliff-ledge almost at our feet with the sickening thump of mangled flesh and broken bones—hung an instant to give me a momentary glimpse of a face contorted in death agony; then rolled over and fell further down the jagged cliff.

Then above us presently there was silence and the drab empty sky. Our tower was back beyond the cliff-top. Soon it appeared; apparently unharmed, it came dropping down to its former place on the ground.

The first attack was over. And off in the distance a few solitary figures were winging their way back to the City of Ice.

CHAPTER XXXVI

City of Ice Besieged

We were not greatly harmed by this surprise attack; the power house was superficially damaged, but soon repaired. That night—I call it that though the constant weak daylight made the term incongruous—activity showed in the City of Ice.

It came with a vertical spray of light rising from the ice wall which encircled the city. Spreading light beams rising from points a hundred feet apart along the

wall. The beams spread fan-shape, so that within fifty feet above their source they met and merged into a thin sheet of effulgence rising into the sky. Tarrano's barrage.

It seemed then that beyond suicidal sorties of the kind we had just repulsed, Tarrano was planning to stand purely on the defensive. It was our own plan to surround the city with our towers; even those on the further side would be within range of our power house; and with the city thus beleaguered, we would attack the wall from every side at once.

We tested now this barrage Tarrano had thrown up. Sprays of its insulated area came down to protect the wall in front; and protected also the triangular spaces between the sources of the main beams. Tentatively one of our towers approached within range; but our rays only beat into the barrage with the hiss of molten metal plunged into water, and with a burst of interference sparks. Even at a horizontal thousand feet we could do nothing. Then we tried altitude. Our projectors, mounted individually on small platforms automatically controlled to fly without human pilot, went up and we strove to get them over the barrage.

At five thousand feet one went over safely. But the electronic bomb it dropped into the city was an easy mark for Tarrano's watchful defense rays. He exploded it harmlessly when it was still high above him.

After the next time of sleep we invested the city. Our towers were set in a ring about it, two thousand feet from the wall. They were mobile units, ready to sail forward or back or upward at any moment. Georg stayed in command of the instrument room. It was never placed, but sailed continuously in slow circular flight around the city above our line. The power house remained in its place, with our largest projector mounted on the cliff beside it in order to frustrate any further attacks.

They were solemn moments as we broke our encampment. The girls, far more agile in the air than men, were lightly dressed, with the supporting mechanism strapped to them. The heating units enveloped them in an invisible cloak of warm air. To their left arms a strapped cylinder gave off a fan-shape area of insulation—an almost invisible shield of protective barrage some five feet long. It showed as a faint glow of light; and in flight their left arms could swing it like a shield to protect their bodies. They had telephonic ear-pieces available; a tiny mirror fastened to their chests to face them, upon which Georg or Geno-Rhaalton could project images; a mouthpiece for talking to Georg; and a belt of offensive weapons, useful within a range of five hundred feet but no further.

Very alert and agile, twisting and turning in the air were these girls. We men were similarly equipped, but our movements in the air were heavier, clumsier. Elza and I had practiced with the others for days; and with our harmless duelling rays I had found that I could never hope to hit her while she dealt me mortal blows.

Elza, commanding a squad of twenty girls, was assigned to a portion of the line some helans from me. My own place, with a hundred men under me, was near a tower almost on the opposite side from the power house.

It was a solemn parting from Elza. I wrapped her in my arms, tried to smile. "Be very—careful, Elza."

She kissed me, clung to me; then cast me off and was gone.

With the city invested, we rested idly for another time of sleep. Occasionally we made a tentative tower attack which came to nothing. Tarrano waited; his barrage remained the same. We tried to provoke a move from him, but could not.

The snow-plain where I was stationed here was similar to the other side, save that there were no mountains. From the power house to Tarrano's wall there was a dip, so that the wall stood upon higher ground. On my side, however, the reverse was true. The wall lay in a hollow in one place, with a steady upward slope back from it to uplands behind us, as though in some better day a broad watercourse had flowed down here, now long since buried in solid ice and snow.

I mention this topography because it had a vital bearing upon what so soon was to transpire.

Rhaalton desired that Tarrano come out and attack us; but Tarrano would not. We thought perhaps that his offense was inadequate and the one move that he made strengthened that belief. From the city beside the palace, a rectangle of black metal some fifty feet square, rose slowly up. In aspect it was a square, windowless room—a room without a ceiling, open at the top. It rose to a height of five hundred feet and hung level. And from it depended dangling power cables connecting it with the ground.

It was the presence of these cables that made us feel Tarrano was offensively weak. He could not aerially transport his power; hence, for offense he could only rely upon individual batteries which, unless permanently stationed within the city, we knew would have a short range at best. We watched this thing in the air for hours. It did not move; it was soundless. What was its purpose? We could not guess.

And then at last, Geno-Rhaalton ordered us all to the attack.

CHAPTER XXXVII

Battle

I found myself in the air; with my men around me we hovered. Then Georg's command from the instrument room sounded in my ears. I gave the signal; and flying wedge-shaped, we hurled ourselves forward. It was like lying on the air, diving head foremost. The rush of wind sang past me; the ground, a hundred feet below, was a white surface flowing backward.

We were heading for the base of one of Tarrano's barrage projectors. It was

mounted within the wall; but the wall itself was protected merely by a fan-shaped subsidiary beam—a weaker barrage over that small area, which by concentrated effort we hoped to break.

From a helan away on both sides of me I saw other wedges of our men coming slanting in to assail the same point; overhead a corps of girls was hovering. Our towers, three of them concentrated here, had risen to a moderate height; their rays were playing upon the threatened area; a steady fountain of sparks showed where they were striking the barrage.

A silent bombardment of flashing beams and sparks. At five hundred feet we added our own smaller rays to the turmoil. If the barrage would break at this point....

The instrument room, watchful of everything, sailed over me. On my mirror I saw Georg's intent face; his voice said:

"Careful, Jac! They may come out."

Prophetic words! The segment of barrage here suddenly vanished. A ray darted out. Beside it, a cloud of flying figures came out of the city like insects from a hive.

An inferno of almost hand to hand fighting. It was everyone for himself; and I gave the order for my men to break formation. Ordered them to get up close to the wall if they could ... to strike, with the closest possible range at the base of the enemy ray....

I flung myself forward. Tarrano's men soon were around me. Twisting, darting figures ... tiny beams of death to be fended off with my shield....

A body fell past me in the air ... others, while I looked at them, in the blink of an eyelid, vanished into nothingness ... One of our towers sailing high, suddenly went dark, turned over, wavered down, dismembered with leprous missing parts—and then in a puff was obliterated.

I found myself nearly up to the wall, and higher than its top. The segment of barrage remained broken. I could see into the city—the Ice Palace, still seemingly deserted. And near it, the base of the powerful ground ray which was assailing our towers ... If I could get past the wall, unnoticed, get within range of that projector....

Most of the fighting was now behind me. We seemed to be holding our own ... the squad of girls was coming down; I prayed that Elza might not be among them....

The instrument room had vanished beyond my sight; but Georg's voice said:

"We're sending reinforcements! Gather your men—hold off for a moment!"

From every pan of our line other units of men and towers were coming. We had broken through the barrage here. If we could now, by a concerted rush, get our force over the wall, into the city....

Within the instrument room, Georg sat watching. The inactivity of his own part, the comparative lack of personal danger, galled him. But he was too occupied with his duties to give it more than passing thought. We had broken the barrage at one point ... from every quarter he was rushing reinforcements there to take advantage of the break....

And then Tarrano's trickery became apparent. We had not broken his barrage; he had deliberately withdrawn it, to encourage us, to bring our other units to the spot.... Our power house, neglected, was momentarily comparatively defenseless. The enemy barrage at the point of the wall nearest it, suddenly lifted. Beams darted from the opening ... men came out in a cloud....

I held back momentarily from the wall and gathered my remnant of men about me. Only half my former strength; but with sinking heart I tried to assure myself that the others had not heeded my call. The fighting here had slackened; Tarrano's men had risen high, engaged at long range by our girls, from whom they were slowly, trickily retreating as though to lure the girls above the city; and my heart was thankful when I heard the relayed order from Rhaalton for the girls to withdraw—not to pass above the wall, even at high altitude. The order came just in time; the barrage here flashed on again, trapping a few of our men behind it.

I was aware of this new attack on the power house. Our units were hurriedly being ordered back. Georg, in desperation, had flung his instrument vehicle at the enemy ray ... My connection broke; and then another connection brought me someone's voice with the report that the instrument room had darkened that main enemy ray, but had itself crashed to the ground ... I wondered if Georg were killed ... later, I heard someone say that he was safe within the power house....

I disobeyed my final orders; I did not swing back toward the power house; instead, with my men around me, we fled back from this segment of the wall to the higher lying white plain behind it.

I have spoken of the down-grade of this land here, culminating in the depression which marked this part of the wall. It was that depression which gave me my idea. Our heat-ray cylinders had so far been useless. They had a range of only two hundred feet, and no power to attack a barrage. Some of them had futilely been used; the snow and ice on the ground above our recent fighting was melted in patches—pools of boiling water lay on the naked rock; and the water, flowing down the depression, had reached the ice-wall—a tiny stream of it, eating into the wall, slowly, surely....

With my men I flew up the slope. The ice and snow here melted under the close-range play of our heat-cylinders. Rivulets of boiling water began creeping toward the city. Other men at my call joined us. Two hundred of us soon were melting the ice. The rivulets merged into brooks, to streams—and soon a river torrent of hissing, boiling water gathering volume as it went, was surging at the

wall. The wall began melting—itself feeding this monster which was eating at its vitals ... a yawning hole began opening at the base of the wall ... it began sagging at the top ... crumbling....

The segment of barrage here went dark. No trickery now; the barrage at this point actually was broken. The boiling river went through the wall, swept down the slope into the city. Through the great clouds of steam I could see the Ice Palace with its brittle outlines softening under the heat ... one of its thin spires broke off and fell....

Feverishly we added to the river source. The whole area here was grey with steam. Girls had joined us ... Elza was not among them ... Elza! With my triumph there lay always in the background of my consciousness the weight of my fear for Elza....

The fighting in the other sector had continued desperately. Our power house was hopelessly damaged; the towers, with their power gone, were using their batteries; soon they would be exhausted. But now we abandoned that sector; our remaining towers—all our flying forces—came to this melting area where the vanishing city lay defenseless before us.... We hurled ourselves into it, using only our heat-rays. Everywhere we added to the boiling torrent; even the interference heat of the fighting was to our advantage. This brittle city which owed its very existence to the congealing cold, lay enveloped in a cloud of steam.

Then Tarrano played his last card. The cubical building of metal with the cables depending from it, still hung motionless. It now burst into sound. A low electrical hum; then louder to a whine—a scream. Our men and girls were in the air around it. I too was there. Tarrano's men—the remaining few who were desperately fighting—had suddenly withdrawn.

And then we knew the purpose of this hanging room. A strange form of some tremendous electro-magnet. I could feel it pulling at me. My power to guide myself in the air was wavering.

From my height I could see down into this ceilingless rectangle. It was unmanned by humans. A room of whirling, flashing knives! Above it, even then some of our men were struggling in its magnetic grip ... being drawn down into it ... a girl's power must suddenly have collapsed; she was sucked in with a rush—torn to fragments by the whirling knives....

The area of magnetism seemed to spread for a helan or more. Everywhere around me I saw our men and girls struggling with it, fighting to keep away, but closing in a ring around it ... faster, continually more helpless until at last, their bodies out of control whirling end over end, they were sucked in like water rushing into a turbine.... One of our weakened towers attacked it; but some of the remnants of Tarrano's projectors caught the tower and darkened it.

Through the rising clouds of steam I could see the magnet vaguely now. But I

could feel it pulling; and soon, in spite of myself, I was fairly close above it. I strove to keep my wits. The others who were meeting their death lost control of their bodies at the last and could not use their cylinders. I had some battery power remaining; I snapped on my disintegrating ray to test it. It was my last desperate recourse.

I righted my body, and yielding to the magnetic pull, ceasing to struggle, I dove head first at that yawning rectangle. A gleaming blur of knives ... blood-stained now ... within these rectangular walls horrible carnage....

A second of despair; but my ray struck true ... Around me was chaos; my senses reeled, went black for an instant. But I recovered, found myself whirling in the empty air....

The city was melting into a turmoil of boiling water and surging steam. The fighting everywhere had ceased. Wavering figures were rising—fugitives struggling away. With my senses still confused, I righted myself, undecided where to go or what to do. Above me two figures were still in combat. One of them—a man—assailed by a heat-ray, came hurtling down past me. The other wavered—a girl with her flying mechanism out of control. She was a hundred feet or more above me, wavering downward. Elza! I shot myself up to her, seized her in my arms, my own supporting mechanism sustaining us both. Elza, spent, but uninjured, I held her close.

"Elza dear! My Elza!"

We hung there in the air. From out the vanishing city, rising through the steam came a small metal vehicle. A pointed cylinder, in height no more than twice that of a man. It came up slowly. Its rectangular door was open. As it reached our level and went past us quite close, I saw a man's figure standing there. Tarrano! Tarrano alone! From the wreckage of his city, making his escape alone!

Without thought—holding Elza tightly within my arms—I flung us upward. Tarrano saw us, recognized us. He slackened his upward pace. With my sober reason gone, I strove to overtake him; saw the sardonic leer on his face but did not realize that he was waiting for us. We caught up with his vehicle; he pulled us through the doorway, to the floor of the narrow circular room with its heavy translucent panes.

He was bending over me, leering. "Jac Hallen! And my little Lady Elza! How fortunate!"

I cast off Elza and gained my feet. For an instant we stood—Tarrano and I—measuring each other. He seemed calm; his face bore a slow sardonic smile; he was unarmed, drawn back against the concavity of the wall, watching me with his steady, keen eyes. Behind him through the low window, I saw the white ground now far below us; we were rising swiftly.

"So you brought my Lady Elza back to me, Jac Hallen?"

He got no further, for with a leap I was upon him. To use my weapons in these narrow quarters would have been suicide. My body pinned him against the wall as I lunged; my fingers strove for his throat.

He was no larger than I, but the strength of him was extraordinary. His body stiffened to resist my impact; one of his hands gripped my wrist; his other hand—the heel of it—came up beneath my chin, forcing my head back.

He fought silently, with movements that seemed almost deliberate. Into the center of the room we struggled. I saw that Elza was upon her feet, a hand pressed to her mouth in terror.

"Elza!"

I had meant to tell her to use the control levers which were on a small table nearby—to bring us back to the ground; but with this momentary diverting of my attention, Tarrano's fist struck me full in the face. I staggered back. Elza screamed—called something to Tarrano. I staggered, but I did not fall; and as Tarrano stood there, still with his slow smile, I recovered myself and was again upon him. Locked together we swayed to the control table. My back was to it. Tarrano's slender fingers with a grip like alemite, had found my throat. Slowly, irresistibly he forced me backward over the table. I was helpless; my breath was stopped; Tarrano's triumphant face bending over me was fading with my senses.

"In just a moment, Lady Elza...."

He was telling her calmly that in a moment he would be finished with me. Did the man's egotism, here at the last, delude him into the belief that Elza wanted him to conquer me? With all the weapons of science discarded—this primitive struggle of man against man with the woman as prize—did the thought of that delude him into the belief that her love was his, now that he was killing me?

I never knew. But beneath the roaring of my head, I heard his gentle words to her. And then, behind him, I saw her coming forward. A heavy metal object which she had picked up from the floor was in her hand. Tarrano saw her also—in a mirror on the table—saw her raise the jagged weapon. Raise it to strike; not at me—at himself. His face was close above mine. In that second, I saw in his expression the realization that Elza was attacking him.

Whatever his emotions, like a flash he acted. His grip on my throat loosened. His arm, swinging backward, warded off Elza's trembling, hesitant blow. The metal block, intended for his head, was knocked from her hand; it fell clattering to the floor. And reaching over, Tarrano gripped the vehicle's control lever, wrenched it bodily from its fastenings! Control of the vehicle was irrevocably lost! We were falling!

Breathless moments! Tarrano idly stood apart; his face a mask. My breath restored, I was recovering. I drew myself erect.

Death! But my confused thoughts went to Elza. Her flying mechanism was par-

tially sustaining; my own probably was still effective. Before Tarrano was aware of my purpose, I had pushed Elza forcibly through the doorway. Into the rush of air her figure disappeared. But Tarrano gripped me as I tried to follow her. Gripped me and clung. A breathless, dizzy instant. Locked together, our bodies shifted crazily. I tried to get him out the doorway with me, but he fought against it.... Smiling—always smiling....

Elza fell safely. But they told me that Tarrano and I hovered for days unconscious on the borderland between life and death, living finally, for our vehicle had plunged into a tremendous snow-bank, to break its fall.

* * * * *

Last scene of all ... They would not have Tarrano on any of the three worlds. While still living, the very personality of him was a menace. With his woman Tara, who refused to leave him and whom he tolerated, they banished him to that tiny asteroid which pursued its solitary way between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter.

A lonely, barren little world, with its single, primitive race of spindly beings—timid, frail beings, half-human, half insect. We took him there—Maida and Georg, Elza and I. He anticipated his dislike of the asteroid's slight gravity, and demanded weighted shoes so that he might walk with the normal feeling of Earth and Venus.

"You give me too much freedom," he told us solemnly.

And there amid the rocks, with Tara we set him down. As we parted, he turned to Elza. She and I were joined in marriage by then. He faced her, took one of her hands and pressed its palm to his forehead, the gesture of homage and respect.

"Goodbye, Lady Elza. I wish for you all life's happiness." He smiled, but it was a very wistful smile. And then he swung away abruptly.

"Tara! Prepare me food. Leave me—I would be alone." His imperious gesture dispersed also the crowd of natives who were curiously regarding him. Here, in his last little domain, he would still be master.

Our vehicle slowly rose. From its windows we watched him. Ignoring us utterly, weighted down by his heavy shoes, he paced his barren rocks, head lowered, alone with those thoughts he never shared with anyone.

Tarrano, the Conqueror!

The End.